

My Fiance's falls in love
with my sister.
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婚約者の妹に恋する

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My Fiance is in Love with My Little Sister

— Konyakusha wa, watashi no imouto ni koi o suru —

- Volume 1 -

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[Nocta'sHermitDen]

- STORY -

Aah, again? My fiance was gazing intently at my charming younger sister. When I saw the blaze that lit up in those cold eyes, I was assaulted by deja vu. My fiance had been in love with my younger sister even in the last life. There was nothing I could do but watch. And, by some karma, I was someone who kept returning to that exact moment.

Chapter 1

Going back in time (1)

I love him, I love him so much, I can't help but loving him.

Such an emotion, one day along the way, I forgot about it.

But, I remember only this. In the olden days, I harbored this feeling.



Ah, it happened again.

When I saw him fall in love in front of me, I vaguely had such a thought.

Because he was maintaining an expressionless face, at first glance, his astonishment couldn't be seen. However, in his eyes that were never lit with emotion as if they were made of thin ice, there was certainly no doubt that something had settled. For me this was a fact I understood quite clearly. After all, I spent a long time that spanned over ten years with him.

No strictly speaking, we have spent a more, terribly more longer time together.

As such, this scene has been shown many times over. The me of the past used to despair each time, each time, she would tell herself that such a thing couldn't possibly happen.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, big brother."

Smiling sweetly, my little sister born from a different mother introduced herself with her lovely voice. This tea party was an occasion prepared to introduce my little sister to my fiancé. This opportunity was arranged for my sister who was sick and had yet to be introduced formally.

“Nice to meet you, little sister. Isn’t it still a bit too soon to call me ‘big brother’ though?”

The pleasant voice of my fiancé reached my ears. It was the same voice as usual. Nevertheless, something was different.

The two of them were staring at each other, and I, who was at their side, had no other choice but to watch. My pretty little sister with her cheeks dyed in colors. My fiancé who took in her appearance with an earnest gaze. The past me was overcome with jealousy and ruined the party. In contrast to I who had ranted and raved, my gentle and innocent little sister had lowered her head and apologized.

“Big sister, I’m sorry.”

“There is nothing for you to apologize for.”

My fiancé had reassured her with a tender and smiling face that I still remembered even today. In the end, because my jealousy inadvertently became the trigger that shortened the distance between the two of them, it made me feel very unsightly and foolish.

“Ilya, is there a problem?”

To me who was absentmindedly gazing at the two people who were deepening their intimacy, my fiancé directed an inquisitive look.

“No, nothing. It is just that I’m feeling a bit unwell.”

“What, again?”

“Yes. That is why, would it be alright with you if I take my leave first?”

When I said such, my fiancé slightly frowned. He silently seemed to say ‘can’t you bear

with it at least a bit?'. To this, I responded with a smile and got up as slowly as possible. Never let them realize you are upset.

"I apologize. Silvia. Please, take care of your big brother."

"Ah, yes!"

I knew that it was impossible for my fiancé to believe in an explanation such as 'feeling a bit unwell'. The one with a weak body was not me, but rather my little sister. My little sister with her delicate, ephemeral, weak body. My little sister who arose in people the desire to protect and who was loved by everyone.

"Wait, Ilya. I'll escort you back to your room."

Behind me who has already started walking away, a voice resounded.

"No, there is no need to. It is the long-awaited tea party. Please, take your time and enjoy it."

In order to not see his face, I softly dropped my line of sight, but carefully answered him in a way that wouldn't show any disagreeableness.

"No, but."

My fiancé who argued vehemently all the more was, like always, too serious and honest. I know you are trying to act like a rightful fiancé.

"I have an escort, you do not need to worry."

I made an eye signal to the escort standing nearby. He took my hint and moved to

obstruct the line of sight of my fiancé. My clever escort probably noticed I wanted to go back to my room as soon as possible. But there was no need for him to move. There was no need to obstruct me from his line of sight. My fiancé was no longer looking at me. Because his heart was already at my little sister's side.

My feet made crunching sound as I was stepping on the lawn. The roses in the large garden were in full bloom. A gentle wing was blowing, a clear blue sky was spreading as far as the eyes could see. These sights I saw many times made me feel pathetic, I wonder if it was because the me of the past was crying when she saw them?

Was I crying because I yearned for my fiancé, because I loved that person?

Once again, it repeats itself. This time that never ends.



I was a human being who, by some fate, keeps returning back to the same time.

Some people would call it 'reincarnation', other would simply say 'a time that repeats itself.' As for me, I don't know the meaning this time bears. In the first place, I don't even know whether there is a meaning or not. I just keep going back to the same moment.

It's always the same instant. It starts at the moment when he falls in love with my little sister, and lasts until I die.

If I must remember my previous lives, then remembering at the time I was born would have been good. That way, I wouldn't make mistakes when dealing with my fiancé. But the moment I remember is always the same, it is always at that tea party. At that time, it is already too late, between me and my fiancé a gap that cannot be filled is in place, rendering the situation impossible to overturn. And finally, inevitably, he falls in love with my little sister.

In my first life, I liked my fiancé to the point of becoming madly sad. From the first time I met him when I was five, I only had eyes for him. For example, even if it was a political marriage, I never doubt my belief that one day, his heart would warm up and we would build a family. Because that had been the case for my parents.

However, he was from a marquis house and bore a lot of expectations for his future. In

that way, even though I was his fiancé, I was not allowed to thoughtlessly approach him. In our country there are different peerages, that are furthermore divided into five court ranks. As the position becomes higher the number of people holding the title diminishes. His marquis house is at the first rank, while my earl house is at the third rank. Among the few marquis houses, his stands at the top, while among the multiple earl houses, mine is middle ranked. In terms of court rank only, we are apart by eight grades. Although my house possesses many financial assets and a long history, nevertheless, I was subjected to malicious gossips because one way or another I was paired with him whose family status I could not match.

As to why such an unfit me and him became engaged to each other, it can only be said that it happened simply due to a coincidence. Originally, he had another fiancé, but that young woman, several months after the engagement was made, she was afflicted with an illness and passed away. Because of that, as our fathers happened to be friends, and I happened to be close in age with him while I didn't have a fiancé, we were engaged.

Suddenly, I was bestowed with the huge pressure of unexpectedly becoming the betrothed of the son of a marquis. Because I fell in love with him, I was desperate to somehow or another become a suitable match for him, but I knew this wasn't enough. I happened to have been chosen, but I was always anxious about the fact there were many more suitable ladies. No matter how many efforts I would put in, I could never do anything about my appearance. For example, when I dress up even if I look good, if the raw material is bad there is a limit no matter what is done. On the other hand, around him gathered many young ladies with attractive face and figure whom by no means I could ever surpass.

That is why, I monitored the women that got close to him.

I made full use of my position as his fiancé. Because the only thing I could take pride in, was only this.

.....Right, in this way, my first life was bound to him.

I knew his heart was not on me. Still, I expected that by getting married and living together in the same house, his affection for me would grow. I intended to spend a long time together. I intended to foster his love over time. I also believed I would have enough time for this.

However, at the moment when he met my little sister, I understood that everything was only a wish that would not come true.

Time had nothing to do with it. In only an instant, he fell in love with my little sister.

I could only watch it happened.

Chapter 2

Going back in time (2)

It simply must have been love.

Yes, at the beginning, and until halfway through, it seemed like it.

There is no doubt about it.

The moment from when that feeling started to be distorted, I don't know when it was.



“Oh, it seems like Soleil-sama is with Silvia-sama again, doesn't it?”

The friend who was walking beside me suddenly let a mutter slip out of her lips as she looked toward the courtyard. If you followed her line of sight, there were the figures of the two intimately cuddled together. Once again, a feeling of déjà-vu rushed forth.

In the academy courtyard, the figures of the two sitting on a bench placed in an isolated spot unexpectedly stood out. Do you realize what you are doing? Or is it that you do not care about the eyes of the surroundings? Even if there are not many passerby, the students who occasionally walked by sent flickering glances toward them.

“Is it really alright to not call out to them?”

My friend who stands out with her magnificent good looks passed a hand in her golden hair while asking me such. To her question, I gently shook my head.

“I'm thankful for Soleil-sama taking great care of my little sister.”

I smoothly uttered words devoid of any heavy emotions to the extent that even I think they are said in a pure tone. In a life that keeps repeating itself countless times, and especially to protect my fiancé who cherish my little sister from the surroundings eyes, I have said this line many times over. While your fiancé is not here, being alone with another young woman is not a behavior worthily of praise, however when the young woman is your fiancé's little sister, the circumstances are different. I knew that the words, 'It is because eventually they will become family', can become a correct justification.

"Ilya-sama, you're very tolerant, right?"

My beautiful friend Marianne laughed without saying anything more. Because she knew I monitored every woman that came close to my fiancé. She used to be one of those women.

In my first life, I heard a rumor saying Marianne was planning to get close to my fiancé, so at once I went to give her a few words. "*Do not approach my fiancé.*" If I think about it now, my opponent was of higher social standing and I was the one who forgot her own position.

At that time, I didn't have that much of a grasp about my surroundings and the comportment I should uphold. 'A woman blinded by love', that expression was the most fitting for the past me. It was such an incident that it would not have been strange if Marianne's house had sent formal protest demanding compensation. Because misled by the rumor, I acted without confirming the facts and uttered false accusations. I wondered why the situation didn't become serious and instead we became good friends in this current life.

"*I do not feel like disturbing the two of you.*" She said this and laughed with a gorgeous expression. "*To come in between two people who are in love, I'm not such a boorish person.*"

If it had been after that tea party, I would have thought those words were loaded with sarcasm, but the time when Marianne and I exchanged such words was long before my fiancé and little sister met.

That was why, when I had heard her words, I simply became ecstatic. From the surroundings' perspective, my fiancé and I looked like we had affection for each other. My fiancé seemed to like me. Because I was harboring such foolish illusions, my dislike of Marianne was turned into friendliness. In other words, the tolerant person was not me, rather it was her.

Then, as to why there was a disturbing rumor that 'Marianne is planning to get close to Soleil', everything was due to Marianne's family status as well as her eye-catching gorgeous appearance. Her house held the first grade among the earls, it was close to Soleil's family, and the plausible rumor was that if I hadn't been here, it's without doubt Marianne who would have become Soleil's fiancé. Even if the rumor was put aside, it was a fact that Soleil and Marianne suited each other.

If this was told to her, she would show a smile and answer, *"My head is already completely filled with my own fiancé, so even in a life time such a thought would not cross my mind."* Her eyes were those of a woman in love. At that time, because it was the same eyes that I saw when I looked at my reflection in the mirror, I was easily convinced by her words.

.....In my former life, she and I didn't become friends though.

A long, long time ago, the me of that first life, even if she had met Marianne several times at social gatherings, they barely exchanged a few words. With the same peerage, but with a different court rank, we were always perceived as rivals. The people in our circle would not permit us to approach each other.

However, even if in my other life she treated me like an enemy, in this life we became close friends.

In this way, in the lives that piled up, sometimes several discrepancies are born.

I don't know why. At any rate, until that tea party, I do not possess any memory of the previous lives. It's not like I did anything intentionally. I thought that perhaps, my actions were unconsciously affected and a trifling difference was maybe born this way, but I don't know if this hypothesis is accurate. I just know that even if my life repeats itself, the actions of the other persons won't be limited to the same course than in the previous times.

That's what happened with Marianne. In my previous life, Marianne and her fiancé

could not have been said to have had a harmonious relationship. However, in this life, they are in mutual love.

If I must give a reason for the creation of this slight disparity, I can only say that a big force that I cannot influence is at work. And because of that, everybody, me included, become little by little a slightly different person.

.....And yet.

And yet, no matter how many times life repeats, only his deep love for my little sister never changed.

To what extent does he love my little sister?

“Ilya-sama, you are truly very kind. You even persuaded your parents to let Silvia-sama attends the academy.”

Marianne pursued the conversation while directing her line of sight toward my fiancé Soleil and my little sister. Soleil who had glossy dark hairs combed to the back of his head exuded the dignity and imposing air of a senior, while my small little sister, because of her delicate and weak constitution, looked very young. Seen from behind, their figures were very disparate. Yet they didn’t feel out of place, the difference in height rather fit them. As if, from the beginning, they had been created as a pair. I followed Marianne’s gaze and the smooth and fluttering silver hairs of Silvia came into my sight. I muttered in my heart, ‘I’m not kind. I didn’t have any kindness in my heart when I did everything possible to assist my little sister to enroll. I simply could not bear with it any longer.’

“Big sister, how is Soleil-sama at the academy? Are you going to have lunch together?” With her lovely voice, my little sister kept inquiring about my fiancé habits. I simply could no longer bear with it. I was afraid to expose that I knew barely anything about my own fiancé.

How Soleil acted at the academy, I didn’t know. Not even once did he invite me to spend lunch time together.

If it’s about the friend that got along with him, then even I knew him, but only up till his face and name. Like Soleil, he was from a good house and because he was a young

man that stood out, there were many rumors about him among the young ladies. I knew this because I heard it by chance. Because I have lived several lives, this person's temperament, how long he would associate with Soleil, the color of his eyes, I knew all these details. But Soleil directly introducing him to me, such a thing never happened. In every one of my lives, he was beside Soleil, but the number of words I exchanged with him were not even enough to be counted.

In the academy, even if Soleil would pass near me, he would never raise his voice to call out to me, and the very rare occurrences of having our line of sights met were our sole contacts. The details I could narrate to my little sister were only what I knew.

If it had been before the tea party, I would never have thought of letting my little sister attend the academy. Soleil was an attractive young man. At the same time, my little sister too was a charming person. If there was the possibility of the two of them getting close, then at any cost, I would have certainly prevented her to enroll in the academy. Indeed, the me of my past lives had taken such measures.

But after the tea party where my memories were restored, where my little sister fell in love with my fiancé, and after I knew that my fiancé too once again fell in love with my little sister, my way of thinking greatly changed.

If you want to know about him so much, then go and see by yourself. It is fine for you to ask him directly. That was what I thought.

Because she had a weak constitution, my parents were afraid something would happen to her and were against letting her go to school. I convinced them for the sake of my little sister. 'For Silvia's future, it was necessary to let her attend the academy. Because it would become a great opportunity for my little sister whose fiancé had not been decided even now. If it's my little sister with her weak body, then as soon as possible she must look for a person that could protect and support her. If her physical condition were to deteriorate, I would back her up without fail.' I made such a fervent speech. It was completely as if, as long as it was for the sake of my sister, I could keep words flowing out of my mouth.

"I'm so happy I can go to school! Big sister, thank you!" My little sister's round cheeks were dyed red in excitement. *"It's nothing"* I answered and while laughing, I pretended to ignore the pain that rose from the depth of my heart. The me of the past was raising her voice inside my head.

.....Why would you do such a thing!

.....Don't let Silvia and Soleil get close together!

Even I am not sure. What am I doing, what was it that I wanted to do, I didn't know. Before that tea party, I was certainly in love with Soleil. My love for him was my life's... no my existence's *raison d'être*. I was only five years old when I first met him, but because I decided to become a person worthy of standing by his side, the me who was 'Soleil's fiancé' was born at that time. After putting in so much efforts to the point of feeling sick, finally lately, the people around us had started to approve of me.

When I learnt that all my efforts, everything had been pointless, my despair was beyond description.

Soleil was gazing at my little sister. My little sister was gazing at Soleil. In order to never let their entourage find out, they understood they must hide out their feelings. Never let them breach the surface. However, their gaze was telling the others of the heat that filled them, while I was watching over them from afar.

Even though I have seen that scene any number of times, in this life, it is the first time. Every time I saw that scene, I certainly was hurt. As I was looking at my little sister on whom was directed a gaze I would never receive myself, I wonder why I could remain so calm. In my first life, after that tea party, I who was still confused, was criticized by my surroundings for my persecutions. *"Your little sister is pitiful, why are you persecuting her"*, said our parents while making a condemning face.

.....*"Having a daughter like you is such a disgrace."*

If this was a story, the main character would certainly have been my little sister. A poor child who had fallen in love with a young man she could never be wedded to, her older sister's fiancé. It sounds like the heroine of a tragedy, doesn't it? In this kind of story that attracted a vast audience, I would play the role of the villainess noble daughter who gets in the way of the heroine's love story. But this is not a fiction, it is without doubt the story of my life. Since it's the case, why must I be condemned for taking pity on my own life?

It's heartless, it's cruel, why, what for?

I cried and shouted so much that even now I can still hear the voice of the past me.

.....Why is it that nobody will understand me?

Chapter 3

The Beginning (1)

If what you're saying is true, then why is it only you?

Why is it only you that keep repeating the same time?



Why, why, why.

After she recalled her memories, the me at that time was controlled by these words for the rest of her life. Every time my life gets repeated, even though something changes a bit, my fiancé will always be in love with my little sister. And I too, fall in love with him. No matter what happens, only those don't change. Every incident results from these facts. Even so, they remain unchangeable no matter what.

The realization that I keep repeating the same time always comes after that tea party. Maybe, if my fiancé and my little sister hadn't met, then fate would have taken a different direction. But as if it was inevitable, at that tea party those two achieve their destined encounter. The one who guide them to this encounter, is none other than me, who is in love with him. I can't even laugh at such a pathetic sight. Preventing this incident cannot be done.

The two of them meet and fall in love. At first, they think it's one-side, but before long, they notice it's a mutual love and exchange the thought that they mustn't let anyone notice it. And I, who was the closest to them, watch them start to develop and raise such feelings. No, you can say that I am shown such development. The two of them who wouldn't have met if I hadn't existed. But because I'm here, they cannot be together.

In my first life, it was like hell.

At the tea party where they were introduced to each other, the eyes of Soleil when he looked at me who made a disgrace of myself, completely lost their warmth. Until then, when I criticized every single woman who approached Soleil with harsh words, every

time he had scold me with frank advice. *“What you are doing will not benefit me, and neither you.”* In spite of his opinion, I didn’t stop. At that tea party too.

“Don’t make eyes at Soleil-sama” “Pretending to be delicate, what an awful child” “Trying to steal Soleil-sama from me”

While crying, while almost shouting, I uttered all the abusive words that came to my mind. It can be said that my appearance at that time was rather ugly and disgraceful. Indeed, my parents who heard the scene I was making were so furious they could have hit me. They lowered their head to apology to Soleil and harshly condemned me. *“Your behavior is so embarrassing, such a disgrace.”* The him who had fell in love with my little sister at first glance and whose eyes were still full of emotion, while he accepted my parents’ apologies, it seemed he started to feel disgusted by me who had directed abusive language toward my little sister.

However, the clever him didn’t let it show in his countenance.

Because the marriage between him and I had already been decided, and overturning this situation would have been very difficult.

I had been raised to become Soleil’s partner, in other words it meant that I had been studying to learn how to rule over a territory. It didn’t happen overnight. I learnt about the history, about the land, the people, their management. I mastered foreign languages, I memorized numbers, I comprehended the social situation. Because I received scorn as the standing of our families didn’t match, I desperately memorized everything to the point I could be on par with even men. That’s why it took many years and hardships to arrive there. Because I was raised for the purpose of becoming the mistress of a marquis house, the one most suitable to fulfill this duty was me. There was nobody else with the same competences. Anyone could clearly see that.

And above all of this, the fact that I loved Soleil was what made it even harder to break up our relationship. A political marriage accompanied with feelings from the beginning was extremely rare. The people in our entourage, and especially my and Soleil’s parents, welcomed the fact I had him in my heart. The thought that Soleil could possibly love Silvia would never cross their mind. These eyes of him that are like a layer of thin ice would conceal all his emotions.

After all, even if Soleil didn’t seem to have taken a liking to me, he still accepted that political marriage. Rather than bothering breaking off the engagement, he used it as a

political strategy and properly treated me as his fiancé. Soleil was an ordinary man who fell in love. But at the same time, he was a noble in charge of ruling over a territory. To carry out his responsibility and duty, he seemed to have settled on taking me as his wife.

In the first place, political marriages were such a thing.

I was dissatisfied with the fact he didn't have me in his heart, but even so, at that time I thought it was still alright. I truly believed it was the proper stand to take as Soleil's fiancé. Getting married, living together, ruling over the territory, eventually having a child, I kept telling myself that after spending some time together and getting to know each other, it would have been alright. Because I loved him. I simply loved him with all my heart. It was as if the feelings that I harbored in my childhood had been deeply engraved in my heart and would never disappear. That's why I never wanted to imagine that our relation might not go well.

And finally, Soleil and I got married.

I was eighteen, Soleil was twenty, and Silvia was seventeen years old. We got married at the same time I graduated from the academy. Since that tea party where Soleil and Silvia had met, two years had passed. At that time, Soleil had finally been recognized as a full-fledged knight and he was so busy with his work that it was really difficult for him to return to the territory. I think that fact contributed to dim my judgement. From an outsider perspective, Soleil and I were by no means hostile to each other. I also thought like this. If I were to exchange words with him, he wouldn't treat me coldly and answered with amiable words. He had always treated me in the proper way as a fiancé, and after our marriage he continued to act like a proper husband. He treated his wife as a wife should be treated. If he were to see me tired, he would call out to me and gently tell me, *"Are you alright? You should take a little rest."* If I needed to consult about a problem with him, he would kindly think of a solution. If I was worried about something, he would give me advices. During this hectic interval, I was deceived by the kindness I could catch a glimpse of.

He was a good husband. It was as though he was embodying the very picture of the proper ordinary 'husband'.

In that way, one year, then two years passed. Around that time, I gradually started to notice. That in his eyes, there were no warmth at all.

In his words and his attitude, he was the kind husband who acted like a gentlemanly knight. Like a model of a 'husband'. Yes, that's it, a model. At some point, I started to see through his thoughts, 'If I do this, it seems my wife will be obedient', 'If I say that, my wife will surely stay quiet.' I probably found out because I witnessed his gestures, behavior and the look he gave when he was in front of my little sister.

The thing called family was really bothersome. Although some distance could be taken, ties couldn't be severed. That was especially true for those born in a noble family. Even if it's only on the outward, you must appear to be on good terms. Because the house could suffer disadvantages from disquieting rumors. That's why, after that first tea party, we attended several others and exerted efforts to deepen our friendship. No, in reality, the one who needed to exert efforts was only me. I always felt that to compensate for my failure at that first tea party, I was half-forced to participate.

At the tea party that was held that way, I was at the sides of Silvia and Soleil who were facing each other, and while looking at them, under the table I grasped my hands tightly. I told myself that I mustn't commit the same blunder as the first time. Before the tea party, Soleil had gently preached me to absolutely treat my little sister well. In front of Soleil who was acting the role of a proper husband, I too, had to act the part of a proper wife. I believed that if I did that, his eyes would turn toward me.

But such a thing was bound to never happen.

Soleil's long fingers touched my little sister's thin silver hairs that look as if they would become untidy even if lightly stroked. My little sister laughed in embarrassment. Those perfect lips of her shaped like flower petals made a pure but gentle smile. If I could close my eyes, I would do so immediately. However, it was a situation where I couldn't. Because I was Soleil's wife.

Without having been able to force out a smile, I thanked him. *"Thank you for being nice to my little sister."* After I said that, like always, Soleil smiled while his eyes remained cold, *"It was the natural thing to do. We are family after all, so it's a matter of course"*.

Seeing us like this, my little sister with her innocent expression dropped a few lines, *"Big sister, you're really blessed. You have such a good husband."*

However, I knew that envy and jealousy were blended in her eyes. Because her body was frail and it would be difficult for her to give birth, she had yet to find a fiancé. In

her eyes I wondered if what was reflected was the figure of an older sister that had everything she couldn't get. I wondered what my little sister thought of me, who could only deceive her entourage with a smile.

With the social standing of a marquis's wife, I had both the honor and the wealth, I also had a husband who was the head of the knights. If you looked from the outside, it certainly seemed I was blessed.

That's right, those were the things I myself had wished for.

After all, I had been married into a 'marquis house'. After all, I had been raised to this end. That's why, the me who hadn't notice had been foolish.

I hadn't been married to Soleil.

"Big sister, you're really blessed."

The voice of my little sister who had said that line wouldn't cease to echo in my head.

.....And then, after around three years had passed that way.

Suddenly, my little sister passed away.

As she was a young woman with a weak body, everybody had thought that if she were to die, it would have been due to her illness. But in fact, on her way back from a relaxing trip to the city theater, she had been attacked and killed by bandits.

When the news reached us, Soleil and I were having dinner together. It was a suggestion I had made to Soleil who was considerably busy with his knight work and barely could come back to the mansion. I had asked him to please free up some time to have a meal together occasionally. Even though three years had passed, I hadn't show any sign of getting pregnant. Because our surrounding had slowly started to become critical, Soleil had to take my suggestion in consideration. He had agreed while straightforwardly looking at me in the eyes.

It was a dinner with barely any discussion at all. Still, I was satisfied. I was enjoying the pleasure of eating while looking at the face of the man I loved.

Such an ordinary dinner scene was suddenly stained by a pitch-black shadow.

The steward quietly whispered something in Soleil's ear. While I was watching over him thinking it must have been something about work, Soleil suddenly looked at me with an expression I had never seen until then. It was a pitch-black glare, like a hole, where every emotion had been removed, excepted from a darkness that looked deeper than hate.

"You?"

That's what he said to me who didn't understand what had happened. With one hand he swept away the dishes aligned on the table and directed his pale face in my direction.

"You, was it your doing?"

He said it quietly, but I distinctly heard him.

With him saying that line so abruptly, I still didn't know what had happened. I could neither affirm or deny his question, but I was overwhelmed by the glare directed at me and was trembling in fear. Soleil took my reaction as a confession and abruptly grabbed a knife from the dining table.

"Master!"

Maybe, if at that time, the steward hadn't stop him, I would certainly have been killed. I, who was trembling in fear and had fallen at the foot of the table, was condemned by my husband.

"You, you killed Silvia, right?!"

Chapter 4

The Beginning (2)

"You, you killed Silvia, right ?!"

He said it in a low voice that seemed to crawl on the ground. It was a voice I had never heard until now. These words were certainly addressed to me, but it was as though they were directed at someone else. While I was still in a daze and couldn't comprehend his meaning, the steward blandly informed me of Silvia's death.

Hearing this, just for a instant, delight arose inside me. Now that hindrance is gone, now Soleil will look at me, now I won't have to watch over the two persons who shared the same heart. That sweet illusion flitted through my mind.

But I only shivered in joy for a brief moment and was brought back to reality by his voice. *"It really was you."* Hearing his rough tone made my blood drain from my face.

What on earth had I been thinking?

That child was my little sister. She might have been my love rival, but even so, she was certainly my little sister. In our childhood, I had tightly grasped her tiny hand and decided to protect to the end this all too weak child. For that child's sake, I had sworn to fulfil the role of a 'big sister.' Although I hadn't been able to do it very well, although the outcome was that I had thrown away the vow of that day, but then, even so... that child was my little sister, and I was this child's big sister.

That child, her, Silvia had, died.

The breath leaking out of my throat made a whistling sound. The blood that had been drained from my face didn't return to my emptied head that was pounding and fully seeking help.

"It really was you who killed her, right?!"

While looking at my expression, Soleil repeated the same words in an incoherent

muttering, as if he was ascertaining his conviction. 'You're wrong.' I didn't know whether or not my muttering voice reached Soleil. 'You're wrong, you're wrong.' I must have said this any number of times, yet, Soleil threw the knife he was holding and yelled.

"I won't forgive you, I'll never forgive you."

His pupils that usually never reflected any emotion were showing a deep hatred. My lips moved to tell him to wait but I couldn't make a single sound. It felt as if my throat was burning hot and all my words had been sealed. Soleil glanced at me, and in one breath he pulled the tablecloth of the dinner that had been swept aside and reduced to a pitiful sight. Everything that had been on that tablecloth was thrown with force on the hard floor.

A violent sound pierced my ears.

The decorating vase that had contained flowers of various hues was smashed up. Since it had been the first time in a while that we would have dinner together, these flowers had been personally prepared by me. As Soleil had been excessively busy, I had thought I mustn't let his spirits dampen, so I had gathered many flowers of warm colors. But in order for it to not become too gaudy neither too simple, I had assembled them with great care.

The dinner that was scattered on the marble floor had been something I prepared many days before after having consulted the head cook at several occasions. I had thought that Soleil would probably be tired, so I had ordered nourishing but easy to digest dishes to be made.

In every detail, there had been meanings. Every single detail had been chosen by me after many careful considerations. That had been a brand new and delicately woven tablecloth chosen especially for this occasion, but anyhow it had been dyed by dark stains of wine and of the dishes sauces. When I recall that night, I remember this sight that had been etched in my memory.

It was thrown away, crushed on the marble floor, and rolled into a ball. I didn't know what should be done, and reflexively I pulled it toward me. I had thought it would have been nice if he had noticed it was a new tablecloth. Because Soleil was indifferent to this kind of things, I had been in a good mood imagining what kind of answer he would have made if he had noticed.

In my field of vision, a spotless pair of leather shoes appeared. While usually there was no sound of footsteps when he was walking, his heels loudly resonated as he crossed the room.

Completely disregarding me who was still sat down on the ground, Soleil was about to leave the room. Wait, please, wait. Somebody, someone, please tell him. I didn't do anything. It wasn't me, someone please convey this to him. I was screaming with my whole body. But, not a single word was formed. Because of my intense sobs, I couldn't utter an intelligible syllable.

Because, I never thought that. I never thought that Soleil could see me in such a way. That he could think I would be a person who would murder her little sister.

I wasn't trembling because I was feeling a freezing cold. I was tightly holding on the tablecloth that was not of any use, as if to depend on it, but right now, there was not a single person who would defend me. While I was lamenting and twitching from convulsions, somebody seized me. I was grabbed from both sides, lifted up and suspended by force.

Just like if I was a criminal.

Soleil, Soleil, for you, was I such a detestable existence? The days that had piled up so far, the time we had spent together, did they have no meaning at all? Even if it were to get an explanation, he had no interest in listening to me. The feelings I couldn't put into words were overflowing out of my mouth in the form of weeping. To go after him, to chase after that back which was going away, I violently pulled on the arms that were restraining me.

Bam! That door that was brutally slammed shut, was demonstrating Soleil evident rejection. He didn't even look back. He left without showing the slightest hesitation after hearing his wife's screaming and crying voice.

.....And then, after that separation, Soleil never approached me again.

That had been my first life.

After that, I had been locked up in my own room and was told by the steward that once evidence was gathered, I would be divorced then handed over to the kingdom. While I pleaded my innocence, I was convinced that such a thing would never happen. And even if I was under house arrest, I believed Soleil would change his mind. After all, I

was unrelated to Silvia's death.

However, strangely, in the blink of an eye I was imprisoned as a criminal.

After I was thrown into an iron cage and deprived of my liberty, a great number of evidences that I had no memory of started to accumulate. When I heard that a gang of thieves, whom I had never seen nor met, confessed the attack carried out on the earl's driver had been instigate by me, unintentionally, a burst of laughter escaped my lips. Such an absurd story, would the authorities, not to mention Soleil, believe it?

When I realized I had been ensnared by someone, I was already in a desperate situation where nothing could be done and I was accused of the sin of murdering a member of my own family.

I knew that among the nobles, sometimes, there were cases of someone getting set up. I just never thought it would happen to me.

However, without even needing to carefully think about it, my position of the next marquis's wife was something that other people could desperately want. I had, after all, desired that title myself. But then in my case, as long as I could have the position of 'being Soleil's wife', I didn't care about anything else. If you think like this, it wouldn't have been strange for people to wish to take my place.

Then, to replace me, what should be done? It simple. Removing the hindrance will do.

I had planned to be careful. But, I had not thought this deeply enough. I had never considered that with such means, everything could be stolen from me.

While she herself hadn't been aware of it, at some point, the person called 'Ilya' had steadily started to be looked down upon. As I had been imprisoned, I couldn't prove my innocence by myself. All I could do was to pray. That someone, would attest that I had been falsely accused.

I did this, till the very last moment, I continued to pray. And I believed. Someone would, Soleil would, rescue me from this jail.

With my knees on the ground lined with cracked stones, and both of my elbows resting on a bed so crude I had never seen one of this kind in all my life, I prayed.

Soleil was 'a righteous person.' No, he was a person who wanted to be a righteous

human. A person that only knew of 'white' and 'black.' Right now, he was simply shaken by Silvia's death and his judgement had been clouded. If you calm down, you will surely understand. That the gathered evidences had only been forged. That's why, surely, he would prove my innocence. Even if it was hopeless for now, one day, he would apology for his fault and come pick me up. That was what I believed.

He was the person I had fallen in love with.

"Why, to such a point?"

"Why, do you believe in him to such a point?" I vaguely remember that was what somebody asked me.

I don't understand myself. Something like an answer, I think I don't have one. I simply loved him. As is I was going mad, no, I loved him to the point of having gone mad.

.....But, in the end, he, in whom I had believed to that extent, didn't save me.

I don't remember my last moments.

Because I don't remember having been executed, I think I surely died in that prison. When I smell the stench of mold, I remember that place. It had been an excessively terrible room for a daughter, born in a noble house and raised since her childhood to fit the position of the next marquis's wife, to die in. Even more since it had been false charges. That's probably why I had not been able to survive in that place.

Originally, the jail where a noble who had commit a crime would be imprisoned in, was another room that would be called 'prison' in name only and would have been unrelated to anything filthy. I would have been put in there if the regular procedures had been followed. But my own biological parents didn't allow it, as well as Soleil. He was the next marquis and his house court rank was the first among its peerage, second only to the dukes. In other words, it was the position just below the royal family. The requests he made, were usually granted. Because he understood this, he had been restraining himself. This Soleil had wished for me to be locked in that jail. I guess I was hated to that extend.

That's why I wasn't judged as a noble, but as a person from the common. The moment my parents, who I thought were my sole allies in this society, turned their back on me, my life certainly ended in its truest sense.

Silvia had been loved by everyone. Let alone my parents, who loved Silvia more than me.

This world was revolving with Silvia at its core. That being the case, after Silvia had died, all that was left to be passed through was the epilogue. The appendix of a tale, just a postscript.

Nothing much but an unimportant story.

That's most likely why, whether in that tale my death is featured or not, is probably nothing but a small incident.

Chapter 5

The Second Life (1)

Clank! The sound of porcelain colliding together resounded in my ears. That was how my second life started.

“What happened? Ilya.”

Soleil peers in my direction. Inside my head, memories of my already ended previous life rush over. It seems I’m about to faint. In front of my eyes is that same white table than at that time. The tea wares prepared for that day had been white porcelains adorned with the lovely design of scattered little flowers. I had expressly ordered it from the regular merchant who had goods my little sister seemed to like. The black tea leaves had been prepared for Soleil who had always liked their fragrance, while several kinds of freshly baked pastries had been made separately for Soleil who didn’t like sweet things and for Silvia who liked them. Disregarding the words of our mother who said it was alright to entrust it to the maid, I had arranged it myself. If I didn’t do it, I wouldn’t have been able to calm down.

Until this tea party, until this instant, my little sister had been ‘my cute, lovely Silvia.’ Soleil was unmistakably my fiancé, the sole person who cherished me. For their sake, I had polished every detail to make this tea party an enjoyable event, made preparations beforehand, set instructions, and made plans so that the two of them could spend time in a relaxed mood. So, I had been thinking that anything and everything would go well. Until the moment the two of them met.

The garden where roses selectively bred were blooming beautifully was my mother’s pride and the place in which tea parties were held each time a guest was invited. That’s why this time too, it had been used. Because I had thought by doing so, nothing could go wrong. Arranging the tableware, pulling on the cloth, letting the maids set the tea and pastries. In that place, I waited for my little sister and my fiancé. While having a pleasant chat with my fiancé who had appeared first, I waited for my little sister to come. That child had been laughing and saying she was feeling great this morning. So,

she would participate in the tea party without fail. Thanks god. I was thinking I wanted to make the introductions as soon as possible. I wanted to introduce to my cute little sister the fiancé I boasted about.

Then, as I was casually talking with my fiancé, I heard the footsteps of someone stepping on the lawn. 'Ah, my little sister has arrived', I thought and rose my head. Suddenly, when my line of sight landed on my fiancé who was sitting at my side, he had the expression of someone who was befuddled. His usually impeccable, toned profile, appeared somewhat idiotic as he was wearing a strange expression. Seeing this, my heart became stiff.

.....Ah, once again.

Someone whispered this inside my head. For a second, my breathing stopped.

.....This time too, it happened.

Very clearly, a voice I knew, said this.

Carrying a pale pink rose that my mother had put great efforts into raising, Silvia is walking toward us. The beige dress that was close to a white hue matches her clear white skin well. With her loosely tied silver hairs that are fluttering in the breeze, her appearance closely resembles the picture of angels seen at the church. I know that my blood is being drained from my complexion. To block my field of vision, when I close my wide opened eyes, memories of my first life flow through my head. My trembling hand drop the cup I am holding on its saucer with a clank.

"What happened? Ilya."

When I notice, Soleil who should have been sitting beside me had got up. Across him, my little sister Silvia stands here. I can see the figures overlap. Once before, I had seen the two of them standing side by side like this. Yes, once, in my previous life. At this moment that repeats itself, in the blink of an eye, memories of my already lost life are recalled. I suppress the scream that is about to escape my lips with both hands.

That I was still somewhat able to not lose myself, I think it was probably due to my attachment to Soleil.

I had never forgotten the failure made at that first tea party. That's why, somewhere inside my confused head, the me of the previous life warns me I absolutely mustn't fail this time. I have to smile. That's what I thought right away. Fend it off with a smile. I must forgive the two of them who are staring at each other.

When I get up in a fluster and bump my foot on the table, the tableware on it make a strangely intense sound.

"What happened? It's not like you" says Soleil while smiling wryly.

I realize that under my dress my feet are trembling.

"I apology."

When I smile, Soleil also answers with a smile and stroke my back in a smooth motion. Receiving that gesture that seemed comforting, I almost erupted in cry in spite of myself. The figure that had called me a murderer, had spat words of hatred saying he would never ever forgive me, was presently not here.

I thought I was granted a chance. That god had granted me a chance to redo my life. That god had taken side with me who had met a sorrowful end due to false accusations.

"Soleil-sama, this is my little sister Silvia."

Smiling, I make a quite natural expression rise to my face. When you are born as a noble, you will become able to easily paste such an expression on your face. Seeing me like this, Soleil also shows a smile. His eyes which are looking at me, as expected, don't contain any emotion at all. But at least, there is no color of contempt.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, big brother."

Soleil moves his line of sight from me to Silvia. For a mere moment, their line of sight cross. While looking at this scene, I suppress my pounding heart atop my clothes. In his eyes that look like a layer of thin ice, a color different from usual had flicked then disappeared. I had certainly seen it.

“Nice to meet you, little sister. Isn’t it still a bit too soon to call me ‘big brother’ though?”

Ah, I see. If like this, I calmly serve as this tea party host, will this time proceed this peacefully? The noisiness of the disturbance that happened in the previous time doesn’t exist, only a gentle and soft breeze is blowing.

It’s alright, it’s alright, I can do it. I won’t tread on the same path than last time. It won’t become the same, never, it won’t lead to that.

Soleil fixedly stares at Silvia’s face who lowers her eyes and says with a mild-mannered expression that her body is not very healthy. I didn’t fail to notice those fingertips that moved with a twitch. I am sure he wants to touch my little sister. He must yearn for that ephemeral being. His fingers which touched me without the slightest hesitation, were afraid to touch my little sister. It seems like a voice telling himself ‘I want to touch, but I cannot’ was resounding in his ears.

‘You can’t. You mustn’t lose your composure’ warns the me of the previous life. While striking a trifling conversation with Soleil and Silvia, I persuade both my head and my heart by repeating any number of times ‘I understand, It’s alright.’ I don’t want to be disliked by Soleil. I don’t want to be hated. Even if I have returned to an already irremediable situation due to my behavior until now, in that case I at least must avoid being hated. If it’s now, I surely can do it. After all, I knew all the incident that would happen from now on. All I have to do is to correct the mistakes. Everything will go well if I correct every single error I made. Isn’t it a simple thing to do? Just like how I’m doing now in that tea party, I certainly can manage it well.

.....This second life of mine, just like this, started to retrace the path treaded in my first life.

What would make Soleil feels displeased if said, what would end up in a failure if done, all the things the past me hadn’t been able to see, were terribly clear to me. Rather

than saying I vividly remembered my previous life, it was more correct to say I distinctly knew what would happen after this. Before anything had even started, the incidents that would occur from now on were reenacted in front of my eyes. So, I chose the alternatives that would lead to a happier life than in my previous existence. It was simple. I just had to follow the opposite path of last time.

However, even so, there were occasions on which no matter what, things wouldn't go the exact way I had desired. For example, in a town I didn't know, they unexpectedly happened to meet. Or that time when Soleil went to visit Silvia who was lying in bed due to her sickness. There was also the fact that, before I knew it, Silvia had become acquaintance with Soleil's friend. In this way, there were incidents I couldn't take part in and couldn't correct the way I had wanted to. At those times, I had no other choice but to believe in the huge flow I couldn't go against, namely the force called fate.

In other words, no matter what I did, I couldn't prevent the two of them from loving each other.

If I had to said what could be done, at most, it was preventing Soleil from harboring animosity toward me. That was all I could do. It was only to that extent.

But in fact, even if it was only this, it brought me a lot more pain than what I had imagined.

I had thought I could do it well. To be frank, it can be said I had underestimate life. Because I had experienced it once, I felt like I was god and thought I could chose the right path. No, actually, because there was only one path I could chose, I intended to follow it.

A life devoid of choices, how much worth does it hold?

Such a thing, does it hold any meaning? I sealed away the words that convey my feelings, I didn't do the things I wanted to do. I became detached from honesty and shut down my real thoughts in the depth of my chest. My thoughts didn't accompany the words that left my mouth, as if, I was only reciting from memory a line someone had written, like I was trapped in an illusion. Sometimes, I didn't even know if I was breathing.

Am I really living my own life?

Every day that piled up, each time I became older, I came to ask myself such a question.

Then, following the days that were passed in that way, Soleil and I got married. It was the same as in my first life. The decisive difference was that Silvia and I had built a good relationship as sisters. And Soleil and I had also become able to face each other much more than in my previous life.

Life was going better than the previous time.

But, it was an irremediably vain life.

It was a lot similar to the days spent praying in that jail. There were no exits. I didn't have any freedom. Nor means to convey my thoughts.

In neither my words nor my actions, not a single thing, I could find meanings.

Chapter 6

The Second Life (2)

In my second life, among the alternatives I lost, there was the thing called ‘peace.’

Although I had sunk to the level of a foolish woman only concerned about Soleil who ran around driven by a violent emotion of deep jealousy, originally, I wasn’t a person who liked disputes. My words were few, I wasn’t eloquent, rather than standing in front of someone, it was more in my nature to step back behind someone and let him protect me. I wonder if it’s possible that, when you’re born and raised as the daughter of a noble, it becomes your natural disposition. An escort always sticks to you, before you can act a maid had already sensed what you want to do and had carried it out. In an emergency case, your life takes precedence over everyone else, you should be protected by either your father or your husband, without doubt you will believe that their large back exist for this purpose.

However, Soleil didn’t desire for his wife to be like this. Despite him falling in love with a so frail being, even then, I don’t know if it’s because he was seeking a person able to bear the weight of being a marquis’s wife, but he never allowed me to be a weak existence. I think that was especially the case after we got married. As the figure of a proper husband, while he would encourage me with gentle words, if I were to really ask him to lend me his shoulder, he would show a somewhat disappointed expression.

That was why I had had to become a wife stronger than anyone.

The me of the first life, probably had only been a normal woman. The kind of woman you could find anywhere. She may have received the training to become a marquis’s wife, but it can be said it was only such a woman. Regarding her other aspects, she was an ordinary woman to the extend she seemed pathetic. That was why, she would slander the women who got close to Soleil or pick quarrels with them, using these unmistakably poor methods to try to keep them away. The one who had been barking like a weak dog, without doubts, it had been me. I think it was because I clung to the position of being Soleil’s fiancé. With hairs of the plain color of ashes, mediocre features, but without casting away the pride of being an earl’s daughter, by relaying only on my feelings for Soleil, I always stood stock still in the middle of the violent

stream called life. For that purpose, I had piled up efforts as though I would vomit blood. Otherwise, even simply standing would have been difficult.

.....In that manner, when I looked back on the me of my first life, I thought this. All the things that happened, didn't they occur because I had been a weak human being? Because my heart was weak, because I was a daughter who had nothing, I had provided a weak spot for those who looked down on me to take advantage of. Because the situation had been like this, I had been accused of the sin of murdering my own family and lost my life in jail.

When I learnt this was my second life, I thought that this time, I must lead it well. Even if I only looked good on the surface. Even if I only became a paper tiger. If, from the perspective of other people I looked like a tiger, those who would attempt an attack would probably disappear.

A life that would end in a jail, I didn't want to experience it again. The person I loved didn't trust me, my family turned their back on me, the people I considered my friend ignored me once I was thrown in prison. The pathetic woman who could only pray, didn't receive a single word from them. Even if it had been a lie, it would have been fine. If even one person had told me "I'll help you", with only that I would have been saved. The me who had been waiting with all her heart for that single word to be said, had been a pitifully and miserably, irremediably wretched existence. And more than anything, she had been foolish.

That's why, the me of my second life, took every possible measure and used all the cards she could play. Even if someone called me a coward, even if I was scorned for only being a woman, I never gave in, and made full use of my position as the next marquis's wife. I acted that way at the time I was a fiancé, after the marriage I expended my circle of friends, and with an authority that was enough to overpower my surroundings, I strengthened my power base. I was considerably helped by the personal connections I had built since my early childhood thanks to my standing as Soleil's fiancé. In my first life, I had been straightforward like an idiot, and never had the idea of using others. So, in my second life, I didn't hesitate. Something like wavering shouldn't happen. Them too, not for my sake, not for me as an individual being, would spare no effort and lend a hand if it was for a marquis. And in exchange, I would also send my assistance if they needed it.

.....What I had overlooked in my previous life, now I could see it terribly clearly. What words to choose for your conversation partner to harbor good will toward you, what

kind of attitude to take to give him or her a good impression of you; by always reading their slightest reactions, the human being called Ilya was created. When facing someone, I took note of their nonchalant gestures, tone of voice, slips of tongue, expressions, line of sight, the number of times they would blink, even reaching the point of noticing the jolting of an eyeball, I observed them like I was describing insects. When doing this, in due course, I understood who betrayed me, or who would try to betray me. I traced a clear demarcation between the people I could trust and those I couldn't.

Sometimes, only because there were slightly suspicious, people would be convicted.

For me, no, for the people backing me, the power to make such a thing happen existed. In my first life, I had been in the position where I knew somebody had set me up, but I myself had been unable to stop it. I knew that being careless would lead to dying. While tracking down people and driving them to a corner made me harbor feeling of guilt, it was necessary in order to protect myself to the end. Because I knew without doubts that if, like in my first life, I was accused of any crime, both Soleil and my parents, even the friends I had become intimate with, would easily abandon me. In that way, I simply single-mindedly sought power, harvested all the highly subtle suspicions, and trampled them.

To this, Soleil simply gave his tacit consent. What I was doing, was similar to how I had act before our marriage, but he probably knew I wasn't driven by a childish jealousy now. After all, he was a member of the nobility. He understood that by only glossing over things, you couldn't defend the house. For this reason, he chose me as his wife, as his piece.

"You're a terrible woman" told me someone. *"I don't want to become enemy with you"*, he smiled bitterly while somewhere in his eyes, he disavowed such a woman.

However, only Soleil grasped my hand, and told me it was fine. *"Even when I'm absent, I can entrust the house to you with peace of mind."*

.....*"I'm really glad I have taken a woman such as Ilya as my wife"*, he said with a smile.

That's why I persuaded myself. With this, it's alright. With this, there is no doubt. It was the correct past.

Any number of times, I told myself that by following that path, by doing so, Silvia

wouldn't die.

For the sake of protecting Silvia, to accomplish that end, this time I really have to do my best. I have to be strong. I have to be an existence everyone is afraid of. No matter how much I truly don't want to be such a figure. I must become an existence completely different from the child Soleil fell in love with.

And then, in the early summer three years after our marriage. The fateful day came once again.

In my second life, the gang of thieves that had attacked Silvia that day had already been arrested. The one who had acted against them had been me. Because I couldn't stand by and do nothing when I knew she would be attacked, I used all the cards in my hands to drive that organization to its annihilation. They, who were arrested, probably had never thought such a thing would happen. They had dumbfounded expressions. When I looked at those faces, I could see that the raid on Silvia had only really just be due to the flow of events. At least, at the stage when they were arrested, they hadn't plan to attack the carriage of an earl. In other words, that incident in itself only occurred that day by accident. And of course, Silvia hadn't been specially targeted. The people who had set me up had just made good use of this incident.

If you thought like this, since the gang of thieves had been arrested, the odds that Silvia wouldn't die were high.

However, I could hardly say the situation was safe. Because I didn't know what kind of trigger would bring about that calamity. Clearly explaining her to not go outside, deploying an escort behind the scene, I devoted myself to the sake of protecting that child.

I have to change the course of these events. I simply thought that.

The future where Silvia is killed. The future where I am arrested as the murderer. The future where Soleil turns his back on me. This huge flow that is headed toward those ends, I have to change it.

On that very day, just to be sure, I made Soleil head toward my parents' home. It would have been fine to go there myself, but if anything happened, two woman who could barely move would simply become hindrances. When it came to Silvia, if you had to name only one person you could entrust her to, there would be no one else but Soleil.

I don't want to let him go, I don't want to let Silvia and Soleil meet. But even if that was what I thought, for that one day only, I couldn't let anyone else go to that child's side. When I told him that recently, Silvia had been in a poor condition and I wanted him to meet her in my stand, Soleil agreed without raising any question. Just for a little bit, in front of that slightly relaxed lips, I closed my eyes, lowered my head and entrusted him with my little sister. At the tip of my lowered line of sight, my crossed hands were trembling. For what reason were they trembling, I don't know. Because I'm anxious? Because I'm insecure? I thought at once I mustn't let Soleil notice it. What should I do if he perceives it? What excuse can I make? Thinking all that, I raised my head, but.

.....He wasn't even seeing me.

My face was indeed reflected in his eyes, but it was as if he was looking at me from afar. Was he thinking about Silvia who he would meet after this?

However, even then, it was fine. Because, I hadn't been wrong. I hadn't made a mistake. Even if the trembling of my hands wouldn't calm down. Even if Soleil doesn't even notice it.

As long as that child doesn't die, it's alright. It was today. For today. Today only. I ought to tolerate it.

Then, that day passed peacefully and uneventfully, like any other ordinary day. Silvia was safe and nothing happened. It seemed she didn't leave the mansion nor did she go outside. At last, I had made it through.

Thanks goodness. It was great. Truly great. The things I did weren't in vain.

On the evening of that day, alone, I broke down crying.

I felt I had finally been released from the fate that ended in tragedy. In a mood where I wanted to let out in a cry that all was fine, I shed tears without suppressing my sobbing. I pretended I didn't notice that Soleil, who said he would be back by dusk, hadn't return even after it had become the middle of the night.

.....And then, the time that I had lost in my first life, was returned to me.

I earnestly believed I would become a new me, that from now on my real life would start. My expectations and hopes were that, my life from now on would be conferred with a brilliant glow. I was convinced of that. Even now, Soleil was at my side,

performing his duty as a husband. In the future, I would always be beside him.

Right, it wouldn't be bad to have children soon. My true role was to give birth to the next heir and to raise him. Soleil would surely become a good father, and even I could become a good mother. Right, it would be good. To have a family. To become a family.

This time, I would truly be united in marriage with Soleil.

I had such a dream. A blessed and happy dream.

A dream that was destined to never come true.

Chapter 7

The Second Life (3)

.....Silvia collapsed due to her illness.

When that news reached us, it was the end of autumn. Although not even half a year had passed, when that summer day began to feel terribly far away, a messenger on a fast horse came flying from my parents' house. When I saw the face of the male servant who had rushed over, it was easy to imagine the news he was bringing wasn't a good one. However, I never thought it would be about Silvia. That child should have avoided her tragedy. That was why it never crossed my mind that the shadow of death would still engulf that child.

That day, Soleil who had finally took off a long holiday was having his breakfast with me. Because it was a long break, we were talking about occasionally going out together. When I remember that day of the past, I recall I had been in a festive mood since the previous evening. On such a peaceful day, a nightmare closed in. In the letter engraved with my parent's crest, it was written that Silvia had suddenly felt seriously ill. When Soleil read this, understandably, his face turned pale.

"I'll go and see her condition."

With a disheartened expression and the same tone of voice as usual, he declared this feigning a nonchalant behavior. But, as he stood up and made a bumping sound, his unrest could be perceived. Despite him pretending to not be affected by the news announcing Silvia was about to die at any moments, Soleil lost his cool and blood flew to his head. "Why do you?" said my lips that seemed to unconsciously move before I swallowed my breath to endure it. I tightened my trembling lips to keep control over my words and to not let my tongue slip. When my mouth was filled with the taste of blood, I finally uttered with a strained voice.

"...I will also come."

I deliberately dropped my words slower than usual. While ordering the steward to make preparations to leave the house, he put his arms through the sleeves of his coat, making preparation to stay overnight.

“I will also come with you.”

As if I was chewing on them, I repeated the same words once again. Even if I shouldn't do it, I grabbed Soleil and press him to give me an answer. Why, even though it's about my little sister, I'm treated like I'm an outsider? *“I'll go and see her condition.”* Why did you said such a thing as if going alone was obviously natural? I want to yell they are not words to say to an older sister about to lose her little sister.

“No, I'll go by horse. You should take the carriage.”

“I too, will ride a horse...!”

“With how shaken you're now, you probably won't be able to hold the reins properly. I'm asking you, do as I say.”

His feet, the tips of his shoes, are turned toward the outside, hurried to leave the estate. Grasping my shoulder as if to prevent me from hindering his departure, he drove me out of his line of sight. “Please wait,” “I also, together,” “Wait,” “Wait, please,” “Soleil-sama,”

Controlled by my emotions, I wanted to cling to Soleil who escaped from the entrance hall at a quick pace. He has no intention to take me along. Eventually, I don't know if it was because he was getting impatient with me who was indefinitely following Soleil around, but his exclusive steward wedged himself between us and calmly informed me.

“Madam, the preparations for the carriage will be done shortly.”

Calmly but clearly, he said it with the same tone of voice he used to announce the death of Silvia on that far away day. Vividly recalling the scenes of that day, while I was faintly flinching in front of his attitude that didn't let someone speak out any consent nor refusal, I lost sight of Soleil's retreating figure.

"Why,"

That single words I muttered tumbled on the marble floor of the entrance hall that had regained its silence. For only a second, the steward turned his line of sight toward me but from the start he probably didn't hold that much interest. "When the preparations for the carriage are done, I will come get you, so in the meantime please wait in your own room." As soon as he declared this in a business tone he left that place.

"Why is it like this?"

The misgivings that were boiling inside came out of my mouth. Even though the one who is dying is my little sister, why did the letter that arrived was addressed to Soleil? I thought that a letter coming from my parents' house would naturally be addressed to me. However, from the beginning the male servant came here with the intention to directly handed it over to Soleil. For instance, even if they were my parents, it would be far too rude to directly write up a letter to the legitimate child of a higher ranked marquis house. Even in the case they had some business with Soleil, since his wife was their blood-related daughter, it would be better to pass it through her. No matter what state of emergency arose, a nobleman was an existence that followed the proper procedures. And yet, despite that awfully long explanation I gave about how improper it would be, Soleil received this letter as if it was natural. In front of me, he had accepted it himself like it was a matter of course. The steward didn't admonish him either. As if, he already knew Soleil would get it.

An unpleasant promotion flitted through my mind.

Perhaps, it wasn't the first time a letter was delivered. Perhaps until now, the letters from my parents' house were handed over to Soleil. And then, the reason why Soleil never informed me of this, was because they weren't address to me. In short, to say it

in other words, they weren't letters from my parents. Because they were people who valued such a thing as peerage. That being the case, apart from my parents, a person who could send a letter using the name of the earl, there was no one but Silvia.

Strength left my legs and my knees felt on the marble floor. I saw the maids rush over in a panic.

I felt sick. The world was spinning around. Although I promptly put my palm on the floor, my trembling arm couldn't support my own body and all too soon it easily flopped down.

I must quickly go. I have to go and visit my sick little sister.

That's what I thought, but in spite of my hurry of feeling better, my vision started to darken. He said she was seriously ill. That she couldn't even get up anymore. Even so, far from worrying about my little sister, I started to think in jealousy of all the sentences the two of them exchanged in places I didn't know. The reason I was thinking I must go to Silvia's side as soon as possible, was not because I was anxious about her. "Goodness, such a thing, how miserable." Alongside the blood that drew back from my head, I recalled my former life. My appearance as I, even for an instant, felt delight at the news of her little sister's death reemerged. Like this, the previous me lost Soleil.

This time too, Soleil had certainly chosen Silvia. It wasn't a presentiment, it was already closer to a conviction.

In reality, I had been detained alone in the mansion. When I came chasing after him, he turned his back as if to declare this to the servant. My parents' home wasn't at a particularly far distance. Even I could ride a horse, and if it had been dangerous like Soleil had said, there still should have been the means of letting me ride on his own horse. Yet the reason he clearly displayed a behavior saying he didn't want to go together, was merely because he had something he wanted to hide. No, in the first place, it doubtful whether he intended to conceal it or not. That day, those eyes of him, didn't they tell me it clearly.

That he didn't want to be hindered. That he didn't want me to snatch away his time with Silvia.

In the end, I who had collapsed in the entrance hall, without having my prayer of going to meet Silvia fulfilled, was carried out to my bed in my room. Within a few minutes the exclusive doctor of the house was called, and after having examined me while making a serious expression, he cleared out the people and told me:

“You are pregnant.”

“What?”

Hearing this unexpected line, I sprang up on the bed without thinking. Seeing this, the old doctor calmly told me to rest while gently pulling me by the shoulder to make me lie back on the pillows.

“What are you saying?”

I trembled while taking small breaths. That was the news I had been waiting for impatiently. All along this life, I waited eagerly and prayed for it more than in the previous life. Yet, my bewilderment was bigger than my joy.

“How come, why now?”

I have always been dreaming about this moment. Because I was born for this sake. Because giving birth to the heir of the marquis house, was the greatest duty I had been charged with. I thought that when that time would come, I would receive everyone’s blessing. I was hoping that, this time surely, Soleil too would let go of his emotional reserve and rejoice. However, almost certainly, that will not happen.

“Doctor, is it not a mistake?”

“...Probably.”

“Doctor, right now, my little sister is at the grips of death.”

“...I heard of it.”

“Doctor, I, I, what on earth,”

What on earth should I do, was what I tried to say but my lips were trembling and couldn't properly form words. The doctor gently grasped my hand to encourage me, and told me that everything would surely be alright while showing an irresponsible smile on his face. He said that everything would work fine. However, while he was saying this, in reality he must have already noticed. The unnaturalness of Soleil's figure not being here right now. Since he knew Silvia has collapsed from her illness, then he must have already heard Soleil was on his way there. Normally, the husband and wife should go visit Silvia together. All the more if you are worried for me who is greatly shaken by the news. Because there was the alternative of going together by carriage.

“Let me be the one who'll announce it to Soleil-sama.”

“No, no, please don't tell him. Now, is a terrible time.”

My muttering voice broke.

“I am truly sorry about the illness of your little sister but, what is happening to you now is also a serious affair. Because you have been entrusted with the precious successor.”

Until you reach the stable period the slightest negligence mustn't happen, so your husband has to support you, he said. I felt encouraged by his kind words. But I knew. That Soleil will certainly regret it. While thinking “why at such a time,” “why now,” I wondered if he will disavow himself for thinking of having a child with me. And then, will he deny his own child with an even stronger emotion that what he feels for me now?

“...Madam...”

The back of my eyelids was burning hot.

“Once I have reached the stable period, I will tell him myself.”

“Madam,”

“That is why, please, I will take great care, so please, for now keep silent about it doctor.”

The depths of my chest were crushed in pain.

“After all, right now my little sister, is suffering lying on bed.”

Right now, my husband is surely at her side, fighting the disease together. So, therefore, as much as I want to tell him to stay with me, I can’t do such a thing.

“Madam.”

“I am fine. Up until now, I have always been fine.”

The wrinkled hand of the old doctor stroke my head in bewilderment.

Why, was not Soleil here? Isn’t it obvious. It’s because Silvia was about to die. Why am I here? Isn’t it obvious. It’s because Soleil has left me behind.

After that summer day, I told Soleil I wanted children. He smiled coldly and agreed he indeed needed an heir, as if it was his duty and another part of his job.

However, even like that it had been fine. At that time, I thought it was alright. Because I wanted a family. Simply because I wanted a deeper tie with Soleil. Because, he had accepted and resigned himself to dispassionately take a wife and have a child like it was his work’s procedures.

Because I thought there was time. I, despite my negative experiences, believed in an imaginary future.

.....Silvia is dead.

Inside my head, someone muttered.

This time once again, Soleil won't choose me.

Chapter 8

The Second Life (4)

Even I know what is the fear of losing the person you love. Because more than anyone else, more than anything else, from the bottom of my heart I was afraid of losing Soleil. That was why I had made all the efforts I could to not be hated by him.

“I, was I, wrong somewhere?”

The words that had involuntarily slipped out of my mouth unexpectedly reverberated in the room that had fallen deadly silent.

“My lady?”

The man who had been my escort knight since my childhood raised his voice from the corner of the room. The only person who was not using “madam”, but was continuing to call me like when I had been unmarried, was him. I don’t know why, but no matter how many times he was rebuked for it he never ceased to call me like this. It may be because he had been together with me since I was a child and he couldn’t see me as an adult woman, but my heart was stuck with the impression he didn’t approve of me being Soleil’s wife. If it had been another time, I would have been able to fend him off with a smile, but right now it was impossible. Because if I let my guard down now I would start to cry, I tightly closed my eyes to endure it.

Since the news announcing that Silvia was seriously ill had arrived, a week had passed. I heard that Silvia had somewhat managed to hang onto her life. However, it seemed she wasn’t in a stable situation yet, even now she must remain under constant observation. I heard there would always be someone staying beside her.

Soleil remained at Silvia’s side and didn’t come back to the estate.

As for me, due to intense morning sickness, I was in a state where I couldn’t raise my

head. Since that time when I collapsed in the entrance hall, I had been confined in bed. Because there was the risk I would lose the child if I overworked myself, the doctor had urged me to stay in bed for a while and to take a complete rest. I knew I had to immediately head for my parents' house but it was a situation where even this much couldn't be done with my own will alone. My health was bad to that extent. If I were to ride a carriage, my stomach would surely slowly be turned over.

Even so, if I had given priority to Silvia, if I had been an ordinary older sister, I think I probably would have gone to see my little sister. My ideals were telling me this was what it meant to be a family, to be a big sister. The ideals I imagined were declaring this.

But, however.

The more days passed by, the more I didn't know what kind of expressions were good to make when I would meet her. All the more when I heard she was hanging onto her life. All the more when I heard her consciousness has returned. All the more when I thought Soleil was surely by her side. I have to go. Despite me thinking this, without knowing what attitude I should take, my legs refused to move. If it had been an unconscious Silvia, indeed it would have been possible to see her while displaying the visage of a kind big sister. I could have hold her powerless hand and prayed she would stay alive. I could probably have closed all my real thoughts inside my heart and acted the part of a praiseworthy big sister. However, in front of a Silvia who has regain consciousness, I can't predict what kind of conduct I'll take.

I will surely blame that child. Even if I seal my words, with my eyes, I will tell it to that child.

Why are you alive?

"Hey, can you come over for a bit?"

I called the escort who was standing near the door. He showed a slightly hesitant look, but before long, he approached until a distance not far from the bed. Originally, even if he was an escort, it's not a praiseful thing for two persons to be alone in a bedroom. But at the present time where the head of the household is absent, most of the people were out, so there was no one to find fault with it.

“I have a request I want to ask.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“...my hand, can you grasp it?”

“Oh, but, well... that’s...”

I made a bitter smile toward the escort who was clearly gazing at me in a fluster.

“That’s right, as I thought it’s impossible.”

The hand I had hold out lost its strength and fell down atop the bed. You could see that my fingertips were losing their heat.

“Say, Al.”

“...yes?”

“I, how long, should I persevere?”

“My lady,”

When I looked up, his clear blue eyes wavered. He had golden hairs and gentle features. The only shield that protects me. In my first life when I had been arrested as a criminal, because he was my escort knight he was considered an accomplice. By no means the charges that had been piled up were things a woman could carried out by herself. Naturally. Because in the first place, they were false accusations. In order to make these strained and inexplicable facts looks consistent, he, who was upright and clean-handed, was arrested. The person who informed me of it was a jailer whose name I didn’t know. He didn’t tell me out of kindness. By your fault, a knight will die. I remember being told such a sentence.

That's why, in this life to avoid getting neither too close nor too distant, I deliberately attempted to stay away from him. Because I didn't want to involve him in my life.

"It's fine if you don't hold my hand, but can you stay here?"

"Yes, of course, my lady."

With one knee on the floor, my escort that was now at the same height looked at me. He had a gaze similar to the limpid waters of the surface of a lake. In the room that was enveloped by a deadly silence, I had the feeling that our crossing lines of sight made a small noise similar to a creak.

"Lady?"

"...What is it?"

"I don't mind ignoring some silly talk."

"...What an awful way to phrase it. Saying you'll ignore it, it's the same as telling you won't listen to it."

I laughed, as if I was seeing some tragic things, and slightly raised an eyebrow.

"If my lady wishes for it, I will lend my hand at any time. If you truly desire it."

"Hmm..."

"Because these hands will always exist for my lady's sake."

No matter how sweetly gentle his words sounded, they were words spat out as if to crush me, and were demonstrating that this was something that would never be tolerated. They had a different nuance than when I said I just wanted to hold hand. It's the weight behind the words. That is to say, in truth, he would present his hand.

It meant he would grasp his sword, throw away his pride as a knight.

If here and now I were to take his hand, running away probably wouldn't be hard. But the ruin that would befall runaways wasn't hard to imagine. Because by making an enemy out of the marquis house, we would have no place left to live. All the more since this body is carrying the heir, there is no doubt the house would track me down in a frenzy. For that family status, for that lineage, it was obvious it would turn into a manhunt across the whole country. I couldn't drag such a gentle person into that kind of life. He was someone who had pile up a lot of efforts to become a knight. Without doubts, he was the same as I who had been raised to become the mistress of a marquis house. The path he traveled along until here, I couldn't let him throw it away just for my sake.

"I've listened to it. You're right, it really was some silly talk."

"..."

When I said that, my escort knight laughed without any vigor. Enticing an elopement, with the remark itself there was the possibility of being charged with a crime. That's why, when he said he would offer his hand, he had surely gathered a considerable amount of resolution. Knowing such a deep resolution, I will not take this hand. And from now on, I will never choose it.

At the moment I met Soleil, I decided to become his wife. That was the path that had been decided by my surroundings, but I never once felt reluctant to follow it. In the aristocrat society where political marriage devoid of feeling were the norm, I thought that I, who could harbor affection for Soleil, was blessed with good fortune. From my childhood I understood what were my role and duties, but at the same time I had a dream. I believed that in a future where I was walking side by side with the person I loved, there would be no flaw. I had the intention to wait until the day he too, would develop feeling for me.

Even now, I was probably still pursuing that dream.

Not matter how much my expectations are betrayed, the image of a blessed future that was once harbored in my chest won't leave my heart. I understand how foolish this is.

“That’s why, I’m sorry, Al.”

I muttered this in the darkness that encircled me as I had fallen half asleep. I didn’t know if my voice reached him. No answer came from my escort knight.

Please, forgive the foolish me who ignored your resolution and called it a silly talk.



Since my health had considerably recovered, I, only one time, went to visit Silvia. Soleil who had return to the estate for his work, requested me to go see her. I was thinking he would certainly rebuke me and ask me why I hadn’t go yet, but it ended in an anticlimactic way when I nodded in agreement without any energy.

After replying, I noticed the unnaturalness of the conversation. Normally, it should be a scene where I, the older sister, must petition Soleil. Where I request earnestly of my husband to let me go cheer up my little sister who was bedridden in illness. That way was certainly sounder. I wonder how good it would have been if I had said I intended to go without being told to. But I couldn’t say it. If it had been permitted, I didn’t want to meet. What kind of face make, in what standpoint would it be good to meet that child? I didn’t know. I couldn’t comprehend a single thing.

“Please come with me.” The words bounced inside my mouth then vanished.

.....Then in the end, after being asked to do so by Soleil, I went to see my little sister.

My parents’ house that I visited alone after a long time, was sunk in silence. Now that the only light called Silvia was losing its radiance, the interior of the mansion seemed to have been deprived of its glow.

Silvia was still in bed but she laughed and said she was recovering enough to get up while being supported by mother. Under her eyes and in their outer corner was a reddish tinge painful to look at. “Somehow, I’ve recovered enough to be able to talk.” Still, now, it won’t be for long, tell me that trembling voice.

When I stepped inside my little sister’s room, I could see that the shadow of a death that couldn’t be driven away was drawing near. Much weaker than before, the appearance of my little sister who seemed to be breathing with difficulty pierced me.

Whether because she originally had a lovely face, or because she seemed to be cladded in a shadow, even though she was lying sick in bed she was still very beautiful.

“Big sister, I’m sorry.”

To my little sister who muttered that while looking at me, with what kind of voice should I answer? While thinking of what words to give to my little sister who is close to dying that wouldn’t make me look like an inhuman person, I slightly stroked my stomach. When I told him I was pregnant, Soleil who had return to the mansion for his work just smiled and say “Is that so?” His face was certainly smiling, but it was devoid of any strong feelings and his tone of voice had been cold. He wasn’t rejoicing. He wasn’t repudiating it either. It just seemed like he was indicating his thoughts of acknowledgement to his subordinate for completing his mission.

“I, love Soleil-sama.”

In front of her chest, Silvia crossed her slender fingers that had become so thin they looked like withered branches. She was looking like she was praying, like she was repenting. On her cheeks that had thinned and lost color and yet retained a last luster, one long tear was falling out.

“I, will soon die.”

So, that’s why please, forgive me.

Hearing Silvia tone of voice that was still clear despite her illness, an inappropriate thought - since when did she stop calling him “big brother” - crossed my mind. Mixed with the odor of medicine, I noticed the fragrance of Soleil’s favorite black tea leaves was floating in the air. That’s how long a time he spent in this place, looking at the decorations of a room that was typical of my little sister with her young girl hobbies. It’s a little laughable to think that brusque Soleil had spend time in this place, and I was jealous of my little sister who retained him in that uncomfortable room.

“Big sister, I, am afraid of being alone. I’m afraid of dying alone.”

My little sister voice passed through my ears. I’ve never heard words that don’t affect my heart this much. If it’s been decided you’ll die, will you be forgiven no matter what you do? The persons who will soon die, must they be granted forgiveness no matter what?

In the end, I couldn’t offer that mere single word to my little sister. Even if I forgive her or don’t, even if I hate her or bear a grudge against her, even that mere single word. I couldn’t even simply say I was glad she was alive.

On the night of that day, Soleil returned to the mansion to tell me that Silvia was crying.

“I heard you went to see Silvia. What on earth did you tell her?”

While looking at his cold expression, I replied “nothing.” On top of being the only word that I could find, it was the truth. Hearing this, Soleil made an expression that showed a disappointment coming from the bottom of his heart and said “don’t tell lies.”

Don’t tell lies.

If I think of all the things you’ve done so far, I can’t put any faith in your words. With that face and voice of yours, you have schemed against many people.

I’m already fed up with this.

To begin with, that child, is it mine?

.....A coup de grace, was surely something like that sentence. You could kill people without physically stabbing them with a blade. I felt like screaming, but after all, I also didn’t feel like raising my voice. The world lost its color. My heart was crushed.

When I noticed, once again, I was back on my bed.

“If things continue like this, madam’s body will be put at risk. If it’s now, we can still

make it in time. You ought to give up on your child.”

The old doctor took my hand with a face that could only be described as sorrowful. Before I knew it, the only person who wouldn't hesitate to grasp my hand was him and only him.

“...no, doctor.”

If a possibility exists, then I won't give up that child. Because surely, a child that looks like Soleil will be born.

I will use that child to prove my innocence.

Oh, I see. That's why Soleil has distanced himself from me?

Suddenly, everything made sense.

It was exactly as Soleil had said. To prove my love for Soleil, I stepped on too many people. While making a face like it was nothing, unconcerned, I stepped on anyone. Because at that time, I thought it was the thing I must do. Because otherwise, it would have been hard to even protect my feelings. I intended to follow the right path.

.....And then, after several months, I gave birth to a child who had the same hair color as Soleil.

However, I didn't know his eyes color. I was barely able to give birth with great difficulties but, without being able to hold the child in my arms, I died. Eventually, it went the way the doctor had feared.

At the moment when my consciousness was vanishing, I felt that in the corner of my field of vision which had narrowed, I saw the golden hairs of my escort, but it could also have been an illusion. Before I had known it, the person who was caring the responsibility of escorting me had been replaced. On my very last moments, no one was left by my side.

Soleil was attending to my little sister, even for the day the baby was given birth to, he

didn't even come back to encourage his wife. Even as a vision, Soleil didn't come by my side.

I'm lonely.

I'm sad.

Besides Silvia who said she was afraid to die alone, Soleil was here.

I'm afraid. I too, was hopelessly afraid.

I had enough. I don't want these feelings never again. Being born again, I never want to.

In such a world, I should surely not be alive.

Chapter 9

The Third Life and Thereafter (1)

“.....My child, where is he?”

A voice sounding like it was absentmindedly dreaming was risen amidst the sunlight.

“Ilya? What’s wrong?”

Soleil’s pair of eyes tinged with a trace of harshness seized me. Silvia, who had appeared much later than the appointed time, had just settle down on the prepared seat. She tilted her head with perplexity and called out “Big sister?” While keeping her figure at the edge of my vision, when I blinked once, I recalled the scene of Soleil and Silvia exchanging words while gazing at each other. The two of them sitting side-by-side and crossing their gazes, I remembered that this made me felt like I was about to cry while thinking it was some kind of mistake. I just looked on as Soleil’s pupils were reflecting Silvia and he was smiling gently.

.....What is this? What on earth are you saying?

As if to shake that floating sensation that was lingering at the back of my eyelids, I casually put down the cup I was holding on its saucer. The porcelains stroke against each other and made a big resounding noise, the overflowing black tea spread on the tablecloth. Even though it was my own hand, I couldn’t move it the way I wanted. The greatly shaking fingers grasped at the air. A lady should not conduct herself in such a manner. But I didn’t care about that.

“Where is my child? Who took him?”

My own voice sounded distant. The scene spreading out in front of my eyes, was that

tea party where Soleil and Silvia met. No, that's wrong. That was already over. I gave birth to a child. Soleil's child. I wonder, is it a boy, or a girl? Which one is it? But I'm sure of it, I certainly did give birth. I, sticking it out through the pain and suffering that were enough to die, I was blessed with mine and Soleil's child.

"What are you saying Ilya?"

Soleil stood up and seized me by the arm. No, I hate it, it hurts, let go. After such a long time I finally have a use. Leave me alone. I gave birth to the child by myself.

While spitting out incoherent words, I shook off Soleil's hand and pulled the tablecloth, searching for my child whose name I didn't even know. The maids must have taken him. Even though I told them to not use a wet nurse, was my opinion not taken into account at all? Or did my parents in law put their hands in the matter ahead of time and took him away?

I haven't held that child yet. I haven't even seen his face.

"Give him back, Give me back my child.....!!"

Confronted with my screaming voice, Silvia lost her bearing and called out "Big sister!" in confusion. As she was calling me with her usual sickly-sweet voice, she asked me "What happened?" while clinging to my body. But with her too slender arms, she couldn't hold me back as I was struggling in madness.

"Let go! Don't touch me!"

Yet, at the moment my swinging arm was about to hit Silvia's face, my instinct kicked in and told me to not injure my little sister. While I was still confusingly holding my arm stopped in mid-air, my lips arbitrary words out:

"Or is it you, is it you who snatched my child?"

“What are you saying.....?”

“While stealing Soleil-sama from me, you also took my child right...!”

Give him back, give him back, give him back! Give me back everything you stole away from me! While screaming I grabbed Silvia thin arms. When I reflexively loosened the strength of my fingers after seeing Silvia’s face distorted in pain, this time it’s my arm which is twisted up by Soleil. Was it Silvia who raised a scream, or myself?

“Stop it, Ilya!”

You haven’t been married yet, you haven’t given birth to a child yet. Nobody has never stolen anything from you either. The admonishing words Soleil said while looking at my face passed through my ears. In his eyes that normally shouldn’t have been lit with the desire to clash with me, at some point a color of contempt that I knew well had risen to the surface. I certainly saw the moment his clever gaze was dyed by hatred.

“Give me back my child! My child, this child is mine!”

As I was screaming without any concern for my own appearance, somewhere inside my heart, one of me quietly muttered. Ilya died. And then, it started once again.

“.....That’s not true! Different! It’s different! It’s false! That’s not it!”

“...Ilya!”

My seized arm made a crisps sound. I remembered that gesture devoid of forgiveness. In order to silence that shouting mouth, Soleil’s big hand grabbed my neck. Even if he didn’t squeeze, that violent action was enough to kill my impetus.

“...No, I hate it, I’ve had enough, I can’t, somebody, someone,”

My voice couldn't form the words "help me." Just like that certain day, my sobs swallowed down such words. It was always the case. I was whole-heartedly screaming. Help me, someone help me. Rescue me from here. But, that voice never reached anyone.

.....That's right, that's how it was.

That's why I died. My words never reached anyone. My thoughts and emotions were entirely crushed. Without having hold my child in my arms, without having bestowed him a name, abandoned by the person I loved, all alone, without anyone at my side I died.....

My voice made a shriek as I swallowed my breath and it resounded among that tea party that had regained its silence before I knew it. Soleil kept grasping my arm and was staring at me who had suddenly stopped moving.

"...here is, why, I, on earth?"

It should have end. I should have finished everything. Yet, why.

Why am I standing here again?

I remember the color of the sky. And the sensation of the lawn, the full bloomed roses too, the pattern of the tablecloth, and also the tea, and the prepared pastries. The figure standing closely next to Soleil, the figure of my lovely little sister who had come late, I remember it too. My eyes are burning these sights into my memory. It's "that tea party". The beginning point. And also, the point that spell my ending.

"Why, why?"

Those scenes that are not a tiny bit different from my memories, that they could be a dream was maybe no more than my faint hopes. Illusions seen on the verge of death, perhaps only a dream. However, my loudly pounding heart thrust on me the reality that I was certainly alive here and now. At the instant I became aware of this, abruptly

my body temperature fell down. Even I knew my lips lost all their colors.

“...Ilya?”

Soleil’s perplexed voice called out to me. When was it? When was it that I thought that his voice calling my name was truly lovely.

“...Big sister?”

I wondered when was it that I became unable to straightforwardly look in the purple eyes of my little sister who admired me. My memories and thoughts were trying to steal my consciousness.

My body staggered violently and fell.

In that interval, my escort who has been here since who knows when appeared without a sound and hold me up in his arms while saying “Forgive me for my rudeness.” Soleil who had been the one closest to me didn’t even support my body and readily let go of my arm. In a tone of voice that didn’t change from usual nor was lacking in calmness, my escort said, “Since my lady seems to be feeling unwell, please grant her the permission to take her leave first.” That voice sounded distant as if I was hearing it while diving at the bottom of the sea.

Both Soleil and Silvia only watched as I left my seat.

Even in my faintly shaking vision and absent-minded state, I kept repeating the words “give me back my child.” I thought I should stop, but my lips kept assembling words on their own accord. The hand of my escort which was supporting my back rubbed it up and down in a gentle and soothing manner any numbers of times. This was surely reality. It’s the reality. But I cannot recognize it.

I couldn’t block the view of that tea party that was getting away, the view of Soleil consoling the trembling Silvia who was lost in a daze. It would have been enough to even blink once, only lowering my eyelids would have been sufficient, but I couldn’t do it. The two persons cuddled close together. Their overlapping silhouettes. Many, many times over I’ve been shown off that scene, and each time it was burnt into my

eyes.

“...Al, where have you been until now?”

When I muttered this with my eyes opened wide, his answer was returned without a trace of doubts.

“...I’ve always been at your side.”

“No, you haven’t. I, called you.”

“If my lady calls for me, I will come rushing even if it’s from the other end of the world.”

“No, you didn’t come. You didn’t come. I, was lonely, I gave birth by myself, and I died alone.”

“...My lady.”

“Nobody was here. Besides me, no one, was here.”

“...My lady, at all times, I am at your side.”

“No, no.”

I understood my escort knight was matching his answers to my words. Even though they were words devoid of any gist, he conscientiously answered them without advocating a different opinion, without disregarding them. My head was able to understand this properly. However, my mouth was arbitrarily uttering words different from my thoughts. It was a sensation of having my heart and my flesh completely detached from each other. Ah, I’ve already gone mad, concluded some part of me who has remained clear-headed.

“But that’s not good, Al. You mustn’t be at my side.”

“...Why mustn’t I?”

“Because, cos.”

“You’ll die if you’re at my side,” tried to say my mouth, but the past me controlled it. “I’m a human who should have already lost her life.” It warns me it’s something that mustn’t be said. If he hears a disturbing thing such as “you might die”, this too serious and kind escort knight will surely worry about it, there is no doubts. And then, far from distancing himself from me, he’ll surely commit himself to stay closer than ever. “If I might be in danger, then my master might be in an even greater peril.” He is a man who would think that way. A man who, above all, pride himself in wielding his sword for the sake of protecting someone. That’s why, in my first life, he got unavoidably dragged into his master's troubles.

“...My lady?”

“Again, it has started. I, again...”

Again, I’m incorrigibly in love with that person. Although the steps of my escort who is heading to the mansion are constantly getting faster, in the opened air garden they are no obstacles which would obstruct the location of that tea party. Despite the fact it was getting away, I clearly saw Soleil’s hand hovering through the air as if to touch my little sister. Although it should be a scene I already became used to seeing, I got hurt every time.

“...My lady is probably exhausted. If you rest in your room, you will get better.”

Al’s voice became distant. While I replied “That’s right” and “Since it’s you who say it, I’ll surely get better” like it was somebody else’s problem, I knew a moment when I’d be alright would never come. No matter what, the self-confidence to claim “it’s the third time so this time everything will go well” will never erupt. My previous life, and the one before too, had been more than enough to overwhelm and beat me down.

“But, if, if it’s not good, then...?”

My muttering voice tumbled down on the lawn.

“Al.”

“...”

My escort who no longer wanted to answer used his fingers to gently brush off the hairs that are covering my face. When I looked up to see his face, it was tinged with a clear anguish.

“Al, Al, please.”

“...What is it?”

“If I’m, If I say I’m already no good”

“My heart, crush it.”

“My lady,”

“So that I’ll never feel anything again.”

So that, never again, it’s wounded by someone.

“...Such a thing, I cannot do it.”

I cannot do it, never. My escort’s voice that muttered so became hoarse. Just like that other time, like that day he told me he would take me and run away.



My new life that had started this way, was always buried in confusion.

I, who had exposed a more outrageous disgrace than at the tea party in my first life, was reprimanded by my parents and furthermore put under house arrest in my room. While feeling a sense of déjà vu when I gazed at the cold glare mixed with disappointment my parents directed at me, confined in my own room, I simply spent time single-mindedly sorting out my memories. As I was persuading myself this was reality, I reminisced my first and my second life and felt like I was watching some dreams, and I hammered into my head the things I must do.

And then, after a week had passed, things completely returned back the way they were before. No, I ought to say I succeeded to act like the me from before. On the surface, I played the usual Ilya, I behave as Soleil's fiancé and served as Silvia's older sister.

"I apology for the mess I made at the tea party. I am glad you were kind enough to let me atone for it."

Even without making a conscious effort, those words extremely easily overflowed from my lips. It was probably due to the experience I cultivate in my lives up till there, but I thought I was truly doing it well.

.....On the surface that is.

For example, when I was alone at night or when I was out of anyone's line of sight, *that* irrupted suddenly.

"You, you killed Silvia, right?!"

My former lives were revived vividly inside my head, blending together. When I was in the darkness devoid of any light, when I remembered that narrow prison, my body trembled and I shrank on myself, unable to move. The metallic sounds reverberating from far away were the other prisoners' voice drawn in madness. It's the sound of their yell begging to be released from here while they jolt the iron grill. Suddenly, from head to toe, everything disappears. I notice no voice comes out even when I try to raise

a scream. Even a pathetic gulping sound vanish in the dark.

When I think it's over, the crying voice of a newborn infant echoes from somewhere.

Even if I shout, even if I scream, even if I angrily roar, even if I jeer, no matter what I do, the baby crying voice won't leave my ears. It's probably, surely, the voice of the child I lost. That child must have grown well. But, at the moment I died, I eternally parted with him. No matter how many times I repeat my life, meeting the child I gave birth to that day will never happen for all eternity.

My beloved, dearly beloved child. But I don't even remember his face. No matter how loved, precious and desired his existence is, my wish to grasp that child's hand will never come true.

But sometimes, in my dreams or my phantasms, I'm holding my child in my own arms. Or maybe I'm just copying the action of holding him.

I'm broken. Somewhere in my head, I clearly comprehend this. But everything is not broken. I was sane enough to comprehend the fact I was broken.

"That's right, you are sane. When compared to me, it's an outrageous sanity."

.....And then, as I kept going back and forth between dream and reality in that manner it came along to my side. Trespassing from the window of my room, at first it imitated the figure of a bird. It had black feathers, and a body considerably bigger than the small birds you would catch sight of on early morning. It was an existence which seemed it would melt in darkness if you didn't concentrate your eyes on it. At the beginning, it just flew around without a sound under the dark sky. I didn't know whether it had an aim or not. But, without I knew it, it recklessly flew in and trespassed in my room.

Before long, it walked on the ground, and one day suddenly, it talked like a human.

"What's your name? Ô captive princess?"

It spoke to me with the voice of a young boy.

“Princess, do you know my name?”

“My name is Crow.”

With its small head tilted on the side, its yellow eyes were looking at me.

“The bird portentous of ill omen.”

Chapter 10

The Third Life and Thereafter (2)

Portentous of ill omen? No, it doesn't make any sense. Because it's too late, the calamity and misfortune are already happening.

Looking at me who said such a thing, Crow opened his eyes wide and slowly smiled... at any case, that's what it looked like. Crow's beak which should not have been able to make any expression, certainly looked like it was slowly laughing; the black bird that was here was probably an illusion.

"...What you're holding in your arms is your child?"

Why did Crow asked me about my child despite him being something that should not be visible? When I tilted my head wondering why Crow knew about the thing I was holding in my arms, it answered.

"Of course I know about it. Because I've always been watching."

As expected, it was showing a smile on his face.

"I've seen you cuddling that child."

"...Is that so?"

"I bet it's surely adorable."

"...yes, that's right. Very... lovely."

Even though it introduced himself with such ominous words, what a gentle

conversation it made. When I moved my line of sight from the phantom which had said it was called Crow, my white arms that were forming the shape of circle in front of my chest stood out against the darkness of the room. Even though I certainly felt a heavy weight in those arms, I knew it was an illusion, because I couldn't see the face of the infant I should have been holding. Inside the dim room, the outline of everything was very vague, I didn't know with certainty what was here or what wasn't. That's why I couldn't see the face of the child in my arms. I tried to believe this firmly.

I knew he's adorable. It cannot be helped he's cute. Because he's my child. Him and mine child. But, the child inside my arms didn't have a face. I couldn't even imagine the face of the child I wasn't granted the chance to see.

"You, what on earth did you come here for? There is nothing here."

When I questioned it while holding in my arms a phantom that was much more gloomy and sorrowful than the despairing darkness of the room, Crow laughed in a suggestive way while flying around. It said it was a bird but what a ridiculous way of laughing.

"Didn't you consider I came here precisely because there was nothing?"

It lightly jumped on the top of the dresser, turned its neck around once then tilted it in a charming way.

"What can you possibly be trying to mean?"

"Anyway, I guess I'm bored!"

Crow opened his large wings wide and turned on himself once. Or so I thought but the next moment,

"Nya"

Above the dresser, there was a black cat. Its body trembled with a sudden shaking as if it was brushing off something, then after it stared back at me to observe my reaction, it exclaimed,

“...Oh? It wasn’t to your liking?”

While rubbing its whiskers against its front paw, it tilted its head and said that women usually applaud when seeing this.

“...I think it’s cute though.”

I don’t like it that much. When I said that, “That’s so? Such a shame, it’s really a pity,” it answered and smiled as if it didn’t care about it at all. When I was staring absentmindedly at its figure, the black cat suddenly jumped off the dresser. As soon as it landed on the floor, it turned back to its previous black bird shape.

“And so? Princess, why the hell are you imprisoned in such a place?”

“...I am not a princess.”

“Oh, well. Even if I call you a princess it’s not an exaggeration cause you’re charming.”

“...I am not charming.”

“Eh, it’s that so? Hmm, what a problem, I’m troubled, I’m troubled.”

Crow jumped a few times on the floor while making “Un, un” sounds and bending its head sideways. It had wings but didn’t use them to fly, what a waste.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. So, is it fine to ask why you’re in such a place?”

Crow, which eventually jumped up higher and higher with its feet, landed on the bed

I was sitting on.

“Such a place you said, but that’s my bedroom.”

“Yup, I know that.”

Even though it shouldn’t have any expression, I wondered why I felt its face was curved in a cheerful one.

“The thing I want to know is, why are a noble princess like you in such a room?”

“That, what do you mean such a room...? It’s not such an awful place as what you make it sounds like.”

“...eh? Are you serious when you say that?”

“...?”

Tilting its head, Crow looked helplessly over the room.

“Take a better look, princess. At that window.”

Since it told me to, I moved my eyes toward the window covered by curtain its yellow eyes were turned to. But, there was only the pale blue curtain and it wasn’t different from usual. When I bent my head with a confused expression, besides me the sound of flapping wings resounded.

“There, look now.”

Crow, which finally reached the window after swimming through the air, used its beak to pinch the curtain and skillfully pulled it. The window frame that appeared in the gap was vividly depicting a dark night.

“This... isn’t it a grill of iron bars?”

When I concentrate my attention with inquiring eyes, I knew the shapes of iron bars were reflected in the glass. It must surely be this. Without doubts, on the outside of the window, an iron grid had been affixed.

“Why are you imprisoned in a room that looks like a prison?”

Crow once again turned its little head in my direction.

“...You, you said you’re Crow right?”

“Eh? Ah, yup.”

“You, didn’t you enter from that window? I wonder how you got inside?”

“...Eh?! The thing you’re caring about now is *that*?”

But, I already knew there was an iron grid affixed there. When I said that, a frown appeared between the eyebrows Crow shouldn’t have had.

“It’s true you already said it earlier but, you’re certainly broken somewhere.”

When it sighed in a quite human way, Crow let out a laughing sound from the depth of its throat.

“...I’m pleased with you, really pleased. Right, that’s good. You’re very good.”

That’s why, shall I lend you my cooperation?

The young boy voice completely changed and became one of an adult man. It was low and enticing, it was a pressuring voice that would entangle you if you were to be careless.

“Cooperating you say, what for?”

“Anything related to you?”

“...Anything?”

“If you say you want to kill people, or anything like that, it’s fine. For me, it’s very easy.”

It was some silly talk. Just some nonsense. Even if I knew that, I felt like I was about to spontaneously nod and say “yes.” As I reflexively sank into silence,

“What, and then I was sure you weren’t a pure and innocent princess?” it said this in a pleased tone rather than a disappointed one.

“...As I thought, you’re joking right?”

“Ah, who knows? If you really desired so, I’m ready to lend a hand!”

Then, when I was considering how to reply, without any warning signs, in a popping sound the black bird literally burst out with laughter. As I covered my eyes to protect them from the black feathers that were scattering in all directions,

“...Ahahahahah” someone sneered in a boisterous way.

When I slightly opened my eyes, at the other side of the feathers fluttering inside the room, I saw the figure of a person. When I properly opened my eyes while sweeping away the feathers that were obstructing my field of vision, before I was aware of it, a man was standing right beside me. He was neither tall nor small, if I must describe him, he had a lean figure. However, he didn’t look weak. Maybe it was the robe he was

coiled in that was hiding his figure well. With the feeling I was looking at a magic trick, I just absentmindedly gazed at the man's body. Seeing me like this, inside the swallow depths of the hood he was wearing, the man tilted his small neck and suddenly shrugged both shoulders to make fun of me.

"You aren't showing any astonishment you know?" he said with a small laugh.

"Let me introduce myself once again, princess. I'm Crow... I don't have a family name."

Call me as you see fit. His white smiling face that said that, was elegant and beautiful. This figure was swaying inside the glistening moonlight which flooded in from the gap of the curtain that had been thrown open. When I instinctively scrutinized his radiant eyes, he deepened his smile all the more.

"So, what is the calamity that's happening to you?"

The slender fingertips he stretched out touched my cheek. His hand didn't have any temperature. As if it belonged to a corpse. When he saw me unconsciously shiver with a jump, he made a smile full of satisfaction.

"Is it the child who is inside your arms?"

"Or is it that window affixed with irons bars?"

"Can it be that... it's an incident even I cannot predict...?"

His hairs which were of a deeper black color than Soleil's were smoothly swaying on his shoulder; his eyes of an even more profound dark color were staring intently at me. Gazing at those eyes that were reflecting me, I saw the idiotic expression I was making.

“...The color of your eyes his different than from the time you were a bird.”

When I unconsciously muttered that, the man laughed and raised a joyful and delighted voice.

“...Say, princess. Shall I help you?”

Having shortened the distance between us, the man, no, Crow, whispered this at a breath distance from my ears. Blended in his slow tone of voice was a wicked echo enticing to do evil deeds.

“...You, what is your intention?”

“We’ve reached this late in the game and that’s what you’re enquiring about? Even though I said it earlier.”

The exhalation he spit out when he laughed felt nice and cold. When I reflexively drew back, for an instant, Crow seemed to deepen his smile even more and said bluntly:

“You see, I’m very, very bored...!”

“I’ve grew sick of this boring life!”

“That’s why, helping you is fine. I’ll give you a special service free of charge?”

“What do you say, Ilya?”

.....That was my encounter with him.

Strictly speaking, because he had been visiting my room since long before, I wonder if it's better to say that we became acquaintance that day. It was the first time he appeared in his original form.

He was a being I didn't encounter in my two previous lives.

It's not sure whether he was a dream or an illusion. In the first place, no matter how naturally we exchanged words on this occasion, chatting with animals was not a normal situation. That's why I think the me of my third life doubted of his existence until the very end.

However, since I keep repeating my life many times, I will come to know.

.....He was indeed real. He was certainly here, watching me.



"My lady, that, is it really alright?"

While I was looking at an history book in the archives of the mansion, a nervous voice was raised behind me. When I turned back my head my escort was standing there with a crease between his eyebrows. Reflecting the sunlight that was flowing in from the window, his blond hair looked a little like they were containing some of that light. When I narrowed my eyes because of the dazzle, he nonchalantly changed his position. He was truly an attentive man.

I closed the book and faced my escort.

"When you ask if it's really alright, what are you talking about?" I asked while inclining my head.

"Today too, to visit Silvia-sama, Soleil-sama has..."

"He has arrived at the estate" were the words he hesitated but couldn't bring himself to say before he lowered his eyes.

“I know. I caught sight of him a little earlier.”

That’s right. Before coming to the archives, I certainly saw Soleil walking back and forth with hesitation in front of Silvia’s room. He, who would never show a wavering behavior in front of me, was indecisively roaming in circle hesitating over whether or not entering the room of Silvia. Silvia’s maid who had probably guided him here was silently making a very peculiar face.

He didn’t go greet his fiancé and went to visit her little sister. While I was amazed by his lack of consideration, even then, I felt a bit envious of my little sister who could see him. This train of thoughts of mine was really not normal. It seemed something was burn off. Despite me being so envious, when he was just in front of me eyes, I couldn’t call out to him.

“...That’s exactly why I asked if things were alright this way.”

His voice was calm, but it was mixed with irritation. I think it’s quite rare for my escort to express any frustration.

“It’s not alright you know. Not the slightest bit alright.”

“If so then why are you here looking for something like a book without saying anything...!”

“Something like a book you say, but books aren’t outrageous things.”

When I made a wry smile, at once he lowered his head without any honesty, saying “forgive me for my impoliteness” while making an expression that seemed to say he wasn’t sorry at all. And then, keeping his head lowered, he inquired with a voice whose impatience had grown stronger.

“My lady, is it truly fine to leave things this way?”

“...Of course, it’s not.”

“Then...!”

My escort who snapped and rose his head was now making a distorted expression like he was about to cry. It’s really strange. Even though the most concerned person should have been me, my tears have already dried up.

“Say, Al.”

“...Yes.”

“Have you seen the window in my room?”

“...Yes...”

“The person who affixed that iron grids, it was father.”

“...”

“Ahah, of course you know that.”

Since the huge blunder that can be called an act of madness which I committed that day, although I thoroughly acted like usual, I couldn’t deceive my parents. Quite the opposite, my parents completely didn’t believe me when I said I had regain my sanity.

.....In fact, their fears were right. After all, even I couldn’t believe in myself.

And so, when my father put that grid in place just in case I would jump down from the window, I felt relieved. Looking at those iron bars while standing beside Al who was making a bitter expression, I breathed out a sigh of relief. Even if they reminded me of that jail I had been imprisoned into, I still thought it was better they were here.

“However, my lady, you’re not the kind of person who would choose to end her own life.”

“Oh, that’s... I wonder. I’m not sure myself.”

“Whatever my lady thinks, that’s how you are.”

Because he declared this unduly full of confidence, I unintentionally erupted in laughter.

“...Lady.”

“Ahah, no, it’s fine. I’m sorry. Al, you’re a good person.”

“...”

I was scowled by Al who was making a dejected expression, yet I knew the gaze of this man would never show displeasure.

“...It’s not like father was worried I would commit suicide you know.”

“...In others words...?”

“He did it so that I wouldn’t jump from the window, so that I wouldn’t flee by any chance.”

“...That, what do you mean...?”

“Exactly what I just said.”

Al had a puzzled expression and sank into silence, deep in thoughts.

“Hey, Al. If someone is born in a noble house, moreover if the newborn is a girl, it’s commonplace for her to get married for the sake of politics. It’s the norm for any house.”

“...But,”

“Everybody marries while thinking that. It’s not just me, it’s the same for the others houses. I’m not the only one thinking like this. So, you’ve to come to some terms with yourself.”

“...Something you must force yourself to come to terms with, is there one...?”

Suddenly, like he had made up his mind, Al put one of his knees on the ground and looked up at me who was sitting on a chair.

“If you are confronted to painful things, you don’t have to endure them. I know how much time and efforts my lady expended to prepare for you marriage with Soleil-sama. You certainly have at least the right to express the things you want to say.”

He had a gentle pair of eyes. Those sincere words stabbed my chest. But I understood how utterly pointless it would be to speak my mind. No matter what I say, no matter what I do, Soleil’s heart is already set on my little sister. I knew that.

“.....My lady, haven’t you been doing it earnestly until now? You strictly restrained the women who approached Soleil-sama by confronting them and explaining things clearly.”

I don’t think it was the right method. But, no matter how you looked at it, the current situation is not like usual. He said that while creasing his eyebrows in bewilderment.

“Why on earth don’t you do that now?”

That’s right. Until that tea party, that’s what I had been doing. Regardless of whether they had a higher or lower social status, I hide behind the fact he was my fiancé to keep in check every woman without concerning myself with their identities.

.....That’s why I failed.

“...I can’t act the way I have until now. Because the one who is approaching the other is Soleil-sama.”

“...That’s, indeed, it’s true...”

In this life, Soleil is unashamedly visiting my little sister without being afraid of what other people say. Since she was the frail sister of his fiancé, the people in his entourage pretended to agree to the official stance it wasn’t strange for him to meet her and enquire about her health. The two previous times where they hid from the surroundings’ gazes and secretly exchanged their feelings seemed to be lies. The two of them who felt guilty feelings at the simple act of exchanging gazes were nowhere to be seen.

Including our parents who permit the two of them to repeatedly meet, it felt like there is no one I know here.

Isn’t it like a distortion has been formed?

My second life had seemed to retrace the path of my first life. In this current life, both Soleil and Silvia almost seem to act like two completely different persons.

.....No, they are two different persons, aren’t they? I wonder if this place is a totally different world.

...If that’s the case.

If that’s the case, then, why I’m still like this?

I thought of all this while receiving the gaze of Al who was in front of me; his limpid gaze hadn’t changed from my previous lives. I wonder if this person is truly the escort I knew. Even that, I wasn’t sure of it anymore.

My life until that tea party, almost had no discrepancies with the first life that is so to speak only related to me. That is why I’m still here like this, having fallen in love with Soleil. At the moment we met, I fell in love with him, to the extent that my feelings were strengthened by each word and gaze we exchanged, despite them being so few.

I thought about it many times. If, only if, I had my memories from the start. I wonder if I wouldn’t have fallen in love with Soleil?

Even if I were to fall in love, in order to let go of that feeling, to not foster that emotion, couldn't I have lived while maintaining a moderate distance from Soleil and Silvia?

And then, eventually.

I might have come to love someone who wasn't Soleil. Even if that love had brought me painful moments sometimes, in the end I would have built a family and formed a married couple like how other imagine spouses should be. Such a thought passed through my mind.

However, again and again, I fall in love without learning my lesson. That's how it is. Because as long as I remain myself, I can't stop myself from falling in love with Soleil. The original me who met him, was unaware of the destiny that was awaiting me. Then, until that tea party where I introduce the two to each other, I believe my love will be rewarded.

.....If my memories were to return, could I abandon my feelings? No, such a thing is certainly impossible.

Because I'm a human who remember everything. Because I'm a person who cannot forget the me who loved him. As my lives pills up, my feelings grow stronger. Emotions I cannot forget are accumulating inside this body.

The feelings of my previous self, and of the one before too, of the one now, even if they have already become the past, I cannot forget them.

Chapter 11

The Third Life and Thereafter (3)

“I want you to protect my little sister.”

When I said that, Crow just tilted his head while making a wondering expression. Then, while keeping this pose, he inquired,

“Why?”

“Because I want to protect her.”

When I answered, he bent his neck even more. That movement looked somewhat strange. Because he was coiled in black robes, he looked like a magician or a life-size puppet.

Recently Cross came to my room every day without fail. Unlike the first time he invaded without permission, he conscientiously knocks the window glass with his beck and waits for me to open it, however, I still didn't know how he managed to pass through the iron grid. If my eyes wander away from him for a mere instant, before I knew it the next second he stands in the middle of the room. And at the same time he has taken his human form.

“...Well, alright. Since you desire so.”

Crow who laughed and made a small smile was bewitching. The unreadable and artificial expression he was making was somewhat similar to Soleil's, but I thought it looked more human, and that unbalanced reminded me that I didn't know the true nature of this being. To put it badly, I wonder if you could say he seemed eerie.

“But it’s strange. Why do you treasure that little sister so much?”

Walking meaninglessly around the room, his appearance as he was rampaging through the dresser and the bookshelf like it was no big deal was not so different from the time he was a bird. That’s why I felt it proved that bird and that man were the same being.

“Don’t you think a little sister is an existence that should be cherished?”

When I answered this, Crow threw himself on the bed I was sitting and laughed.

“Right, I guess so. But you know, that, I think it’s a sophism.”

“A sophism?”

“Yup. Saying ‘since she’s a little sister, she must be treasured’, it’s only a fragment of the truth.”

I think he is older than me. But according to what I saw, I also had the hunch he was considerably younger. If you looked closely, his features were those of a young boy, but at the second you thought so, he would show a mature expression. I truly think he was a mysterious man.

“You like your fiancé, right? Isn’t she your love rival?”

The man who was slumped on the bed said so while raising his almond eyes.

“...Have I told you about Soleil-sama?”

“No. But I can tell just by watching.”

Crow raised a cheerful laughter. I really wonder from where he was watching. At least I've never exchanged words with Soleil in front of him. In the first place, Crow appeared in the middle of the night, and because he came only to my room, even if he said he was watching me I actually didn't feel it was the case. Maybe during day time, he was taking a different form? I thought about asking him, but I suddenly realized he wasn't the kind of man who would obediently and honestly answered such a question.

"Saying '*it's because she's my rival in love*' won't become enough of a reason to not cherish her..."

At least that was the case for me. For me who knew what would happen from now on, I had a reason to treasure her. This time too it was the same. In order to not lose my little sister, I'll do the things that must be done. That was it. And so, I will use the things that can be used. Just like last time.

"Moreover, didn't you say that compensation will be unnecessary? That you'll lend me your hand."

"Well, I certainly said so. I don't need any reward. Reward in monetary term that is."

"..."

"Don't make that face. I'll fulfil my promise... But I haven't heard your answer."

Crow who abruptly rose up put his head on my lap, behaving like a spoiled child.

"However, I want a motive."

"...A motive?"

"A motive for me to make a move."

The silent air froze. I felt it. It was neither warm nor cold, so to speak, it was like I was pierced by a pair of eyes that were like two pitch black stones. It was as if they were

telling me they wouldn't allow me to evade the question.

".....Just once."

"...hm?"

"Once, my life was saved by my little sister."

That's right. And so, I can hardly leave my little sister. I'm feeling indebted to her. I've the obligation to protect that frail little sister.

"In my childhood, there was a time I was about to be kicked by the horse I was taking care of."

I said I was taking care of it, but it's not like I was earnestly doing it. From time to time I would go to the stables to take a breather from my studies, and then I would assist the stable boy but only to the degree of landing a hand. In reality you could say I was in the way of his work. I thought so at that time too. And so, everybody who was there at that time was careless. Usually it was a docile horse, nobody thought such a thing would happen. The stable boy was also beside me, holding the horse's bridle. That's why, nobody expected the horse to raise its front feet, frightened by me who had stumbled upon a stone and fell down in front of it.

.....*Big sister!*

I clearly remember the hands of my young little sister that covered my back. My little sister hadn't been here from the beginning, she simply happened to be passing nearby by chance. As usual she had been sick and confined in bed until a few days before, and probably because it wasn't good to always stay shut in her room, her maids brought her out for a walk as a light exercise. There, she caught sight of me who was about to be kicked by the horse. Really, it only happened coincidentally. Then she tried to protect me as much as she could.

The horse neighed and his huge figure over us drew near. I, who couldn't even move because of fear, was protected by my very, very small little sister. At the critical moment, if the stable boy who noticed the situation hadn't pull on the bridle, my little

sister's head would surely have been kicked by the horse. It probably wouldn't have ended well.

"...That's all?"

Crow who was listening to my story showed a dumbfounded expression.

".....Yes, that's all."

But "that" was more than enough. In those days, because my sickly little sister had been isolated most of the time, I had barely exchanged any words with her at all. Even though some distance was born because she was a little sister from a different mother, since we were physically separated, there were even less occasions to come in contact. I knew I had a little sister, but I wasn't strongly aware of her existence. Whether she was here or not, I thought it was the same. And yet. That child, called me "big sister" and tried to protect me. To the point of wholeheartedly using her whole body.

"In short, you were moved by her kindness."

"...Right. Maybe that's the case."

Silvia protected me on the spur of the moment, when she came back to herself and saw we were both safe, she was trembling a little. She tightly shrank her excessively helpless and slender limbs and clung to me, crying it had been scary. That's why I embraced that body while making a vow. I swore I would protect that small and frail little sister. The next time something would happen, I thought *I* should protect her.

And yet.

".....Ahah, good. It's good, very good."

A pair of pitch black eyes looked toward me. I didn't know what he was thinking, but

his sharp eyes had become softer, loosen in delight.

“Alright, I understand. I’ll protect your little sis.”

Since I don’t dislike those human-liked emotions, said Crow while playing and rubbing the back of his head over my laps. When I reflexively stroke his forehead, for a second, Crow made an engrossed expression and soon laughed with satisfaction.

Only a little time remained before I graduate from the academy. If things continue like this and nothing happens, Soleil and I will get married. Then, after three years, that summer will come again. That summer where Silvia is attacked in a robbery and die.

This time, I wonder what on earth will happen? Can I do it well?

I’m scared. I think I’m just scared.

But, if I don’t do it well, I’ll be condemned by Soleil again.



The day Soleil and I got married, Silvia took part to the ceremony as a relative.

After the ceremony itself, we assembled outside the church where a small garden had been prepared and received blessings from our relatives and old friends. My little sister stood before Soleil and I with my parents and congratulated us with a smile. Be happy, she said as she laughed. Despite it being my own wedding ceremony, I only remembered clearly my little sister’s appearance. Her silver hairs were gathered loosely and she was wearing a light red lipstick that drew one’s eyes. It looked really attractive on her white skin. Just like that tea party where the two of them met for the first time, she was wearing a beige dress close to a white color and was showing a little smile. The ephemeral figure of the petite and delicate little sister who didn’t leave the house much was eye-catching and stood out a lot more than I, the bride.

Soleil gave his thanks to the congratulating words Silvia expressed. Beside me, that cold pair of eyes slightly loosened. But the face I saw from profile carried a tinge of lamentation that couldn’t be hidden. He couldn’t be with the one he loved. Once again, he was realizing this.

I couldn't look at his face any longer and when I suddenly raised my eyes, above my head I saw a black bird flying in big circles. As if it was laughing at me.

"...Crow."

Soleil who heard my mutter with his sharp ears bent his head with a puzzled expression. When I shook my head and said it was nothing, he left it as it was, stifled a yawn and dismissed it with a bored "I see." It was as if he didn't have any interest. As if it was completely not worth worrying about it. And then, his gaze once again turned toward my little sister.

Today should have been the happiest day of my life. The me of the first life certainly believed this. It took several weeks to choose today dress. And yet, there were still part I wasn't please with so I embroidered them myself. Each time I inserted a needle, I felt I took a step closer to happiness. My mouth would smile widely as I made that wish. But, if you attentively observed the situation like I was doing now, you could see Soleil didn't have the slightest bit of affection toward me. In order to not let anybody sense it, to not let anybody realize it, he pretended nothing was wrong, but I knew that in reality he found me annoying and was tired of me.

To that extent, that much. I'm not loved by Soleil.

While watching the icy profile of Soleil who pledged an eternal love before God, I realized this man would deceived even God like this. He was a person who sealed his own love for the sake of politics. A person who chose to defend his lands and people rather than love. In that way, it can be said that since he was able to restrain his emotions and take rational decisions, he was the ideal figure for an administrator. The people who lost sight of their road due to love were not few. But, him, would never do that. He chose me for that.

And it was that person I fell in love with. Even when I see his appearance that can be interpreted as being cold-headed, there is no way my emotion would subside.

That's why, in front of God, I pledge a true oath. I would continue to love him at all times. Even if he didn't love me, I could swear a love worth of two persons' share. By doing so, maybe someday rewarding times would come.

And then, I became Soleil's wife.

.....I think my third life was, if compared to the previous lives, spent in overwhelmingly calmer days. While making preparations for that summer day, I also lead a social life as the wife of a marquis, fulfilling my duties as Soleil's spouse without a flaw. Everything was for the sake of avoiding the incident that would happen during the summer of the third year. It was necessary to build personal connections and to furthermore strengthen those relationships. I worked vigorously in order to make the necessary arrangements and lay the groundwork.

"Because it's you Ilya who told me to, I looked into it, but what the hell do you want to do with such a small group of bandits?"

Crow tilted his head, mystified. But he cooperated without any further pressing me who was dodging his question ambiguously and didn't give a reason.

"I don't know what you're trying to do, but anyhow, since I'm bored, lending a hand is no problem at all" he said with a smile.

.....And then, one day. An unforeseen incident occurred.

When I arrived at the place I had been called because he had something to talk about with me, I discovered that Soleil had brought along my little sister. Silvia had a green and stiffed expression, and Soleil was standing in front of such a little sister as if to protect her. When I stared at their figures wondering what happened, Soleil said to me with a noble face that looked no different from usual,

"...Silvia is not to blame."

Abruptly starting the conversation with those words, first of all he urged my little sister whose complexion was bad to sit down. But Silvia silently shook her head. Tears were accumulating inside her big eyes, as if she was enduring something she closed her lips tightly like she was about to cry at any moment. Seized by a presentiment, my

back trembled a little.

“...She got pregnant.”

Soleil who suddenly inhaled a long breath declared this with a voice devoid of any intonation.

“...Who is it?”

My muttered words fell down inside the wide drawing room. I knew it in my head, but my mouth couldn't catch up with my understanding and moved unintentionally.

“Silvia is pregnant with my child.”

This time when the words were clearly told, my mind became pure white. Yes, literally pure white.

There was only the three of us in the drawing room that had been cleared out of people beforehand. That's why my unsteady breathing sounds echoed clearly. The voice that finally managed to squeeze out the word “Why?” was shaking greatly. The trembling word that was said as if I was spitting out a lump of stone from the depth of my chest rolled down without any meaning.

Silvia had a frail body, it was concluded it would probably be difficult for her to want children. For that reason, she didn't have a fiancé. Inside the noble society where it is said giving birth to an heir is the women's role, she was at an overwhelming disadvantage. It was supposed to be the case. Until that moment.

Not knowing what to do, I kept repeating “Why?” like an idiot. With a voice that seemed to be about to vanish, Silvia answered in a mutter, “Big sister, I'm sorry.” While keeping her figure at the corner of my field of vision, my eyes moved toward Soleil's face. I'm sure today was our wedding anniversary. The anniversary of our second year. Only two years have passed.

While I was making the arrangements to face the summer of the third year, in a place I didn't know, those two had many lover meetings over and over again.

The only one who kept his composure at that time was probably Soleil. Even though it could count as an infidelity, he told in a clear voice that didn't reveal the slightest feeling of guilt "I am in love with Silvia." In my previous life, in the one before too, they were the words I didn't receive not even once. No matter how much I devoted myself, no matter how many times I said I loved Soleil, those words were never returned, not even once. Those words, has my little sister obtained them only because she was "Silvia"? Will she build a happy family while I literally couldn't even hold in my arms the child I gave birth to? Those things, were what I originally should have got.

I screamed loudly. As if my shout could shatter the world to pieces. Even though I knew such a stupid thing would never happen.



"...Ilya, why are you crying?"

I was laying on the floor rounded up like a fetus when an oddly sweet voice came from above. When I looked up, Crow's beautiful face was right there. At that time, when they heard me screamed, the escorts barged into the drawing room. I unconsciously searched for the figure of Al, but then I remembered that after I got married I left Al behind at my parent's home. When I told him to protect my little sister rather than me, his face looked hurt for a second before he managed to erase his expression. After having barged into the room, the escort of the marquis house whom I had never exchanged even a single word with, carried me up as I was still in a confused and shocked state, then he threw me into my room and locked it up from the outside.

"...Crow, Crow,"

If I'm allowed to give an excuse, then I'll said that at that time, I was surely at my limit. I, who had gone over my critical points many times, who had tasted true despair, at that moment, I hung onto the nearest person who offered me a gentle expression, Crow. That why, I talked about the path I was following, about everything regarding the incidents I couldn't perceive as reality. Surely, I must have wished for someone to

pity me and show me some compassion. I wished for someone to console me “You’ve endure well by yourself.” And then, I wished for them to tell me “It’s alright to not worry anymore.” Anything was fine, I just wanted a reason to live through this cruel reality.

“Ilya, Ilya...”

After having listen until the end to the story I told while sobbing convulsively and spitting out words bit by bit, Crow called my name.

Would he believe in such an absurd story? But I wanted him to. Otherwise.

A slender finger scooped up my chin. In my field of vision that has been forcibly raised up, Crow’s face appeared. Regarding what this white face that was like a mask was thinking about, nothing could be read from his expression. His pitch-black pair of eyes was reflecting my weeping and anxious expression.

“If what you are saying is true, then...”

Crow cut his words at that point and stared intensely in my eyes. It was as if he was trying to peek into the depth of my heart. When I thought that, as expected, he didn’t believe it, my feelings sank, but then they were risen up by his followings words. However, his next words were not ones of sympathy nor kindness.

“It’s almost like hell.”

Licking the tears shed on my cheeks, Crow laughed.

“Hey, Ilya. The place called hell, is were sinner goes, right?”

“Sinner...?”

“People who committed sins fall down to that place after their death, no? And then,

there they receive their punishment, don't they"

"They receive..."

Their punishment...?

"If this is hell. If you're receiving your punishment. Then, what kind of sin did you commit?"

Crow's cold fingers tightly grasped my hands like he was scratching a short pile carpet and pinned me down from above.

"Why is it happening to you and you alone?"

"Why is it only you that repeat the same time?"

Several drops of water fell on Crow hand that is covering my trembling fingers. If this is a punishment. If this is the reparation for committing a sin. Then my sin must surely be having wished for my own happiness. In other words, it had the same meaning as wishing for Soleil and Silvia's unhappiness. Certainly, the me of my first life was delighted by Silvia's death.

But was it a sin worth of giving rise to this much of a hell?

"Can it be that you, you think that you're the only one unhappy.....?"

How did I answer Crow's question? I don't remember anymore. What I remember, is my own figure as I stood alone in my room.

"However, my lady, you're not the kind of person who would choose to end her own life."

That was what had asserted Al's voice.

Still, I was always anxious, and after my marriage I never brought an edged tool inside my room. Because I feared the possibility that I would injure my skin myself. Whether it was scissor, knife or razor, I didn't leave anything in my room. So, I braided a rope with the bed sheets I tore with my tooth.

I wasn't sane. I wasn't sane, but I completely understood what I was doing. The infant I could never embrace not even once, my little sister will surely hold him inside her arms. When I imagined Soleil's face as he was smiling in happiness while looking at the two, it became easy to carry it out. It's already over. I've already lost my purpose. I cannot watch the appearance of that child who had become happy, I cannot watch Soleil building a future with someone else. If it's a punishment, if it's the reparation for having committed a sin, then. This reality will simply continue. A sudden complete reversal of the story will not occur.

I hung the rope around my neck. The tips of my toes slipped off the chair I was stepping on.

Chapter 12

The Third Life and Thereafter (4)

“It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Ilya Il Machisse.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Soleil Van Nortis.”

On the day of our first meeting, Soleil lightly tilted his small head and showed a smile. That greeting that was not directed at me but at my parents standing behind me, watching over the children introduction, was exchanged very easily. Like him, I also introduced myself, but I couldn’t help but feel the difference in our peerage and my countenance became stiff as I was careful of the mood of the other party. However, I think Soleil’s parents didn’t get a particularly bad impression of me. *“Oh, what a lovely young lady”* said his mother with a smile, and Soleil too turned his sights toward me. When his smile was quickly pulled up, and his face that became an elaborate and beautiful mask like a porcelain doll incidentally turned in my direction, I realized. That person, was wounded. I understood why. I heard that his fiancé had just passed away. That they got along extremely well as childhood friends. I had never seen the person who died, but I heard the rumors. Even though she was young, she was intelligent and very pretty. I also had been told by father to become like that person. He said that if I aimed to become a lady, then that girl who was closed in age was a good model. Although it was an unreasonable demand to take someone I had not even the face of as a goal, several persons who worked as my private tutors had also taught that girl, and each and every single one said the same thing about her. That girl, was wonderful.

As soon as that person died, because the position of being Soleil’s fiancé was unexpectedly dropped on me, it can be said I became her substitute like my father told me to be.

The first meeting that took place in the Marquis’s garden progress very calmly. Because both our fathers originally had friendly relations and our mothers too were acquaintances in the high society, the conversations seemed to progress lively. Regarding Soleil and I, after having exchanged our introduction we both kept silent, but as I was at a loss, Soleil guided me and nonchalantly taught me what I should do.

For example, he showed me at which timing drink tea, eat pastry, how to ask for permission to leave the seat when I felt tired; with his gaze or his gesture, he demonstrated everything for me. That's why all I had to do most of the time was to smile and wait for time to pass. I didn't know what Soleil was thinking, but the time spent meeting each other gazes and watching from the sidelines was not that bad. When our parents allowed us to leave our seat, we took a stroll in the garden together. I wasn't accustomed to the dress that had been prepared for today introduction meeting, and it couldn't be said the dress was easy to walk with, but each time my feet stopped, a few steps ahead of me Soleil was waiting for me. He never said "hurry up" or "not done yet?" He was simply waiting. When I chased after him in a hurry, the expression in his eyes that had a trace of sharpness despite its childish features became just a little bit softer. Before long, his small fingers grasped my even smaller fingertips and he said,

"Let's get along well". From there on, let's always, always get along well.

Soleil was two years older than me. He was only seven, but his eyes were always gazing at the future. I should naturally be there too, and we planned to become a harmonious pair of husband and wife.

.....I wonder where I went wrong.



I clearly saw my hand letting go of the cup filled with black tea. The crack made when it collided with its saucer in a clanking sound, surely, was a representation of the relationship between Soleil and me. When I raised my head, my eyes reflected the face of Soleil who was unusually surprised. Next to him, having shrugged her shoulder after being frightened by the sound of the colliding porcelain, stood Silvia.

Now, the two have accomplished their first meeting.

At that moment, recalled memories filled my head to the brim. Along with the frightening feeling that the blood in my whole body flew backwards, various scenes flashed passed then disappeared. My passed life. Its previous life and the one before that, the one before that too, and the one of even before, the previous one of that. I wondered at which one I stopped counting.

“Ilya, what happened...?”

While looking at Soleil’s doubtful expression, I remembered the lives I went through until now. I am a human who cannot forget anything and everything. It was supposed to be like that. From which point did a hole start to appear in the memories I should be remembering? I remember the previous one, but I can’t clearly recall the one before that. However, I can recollect the one before it perfectly, and I’m forgetting the one from even further before. It means I have repeated the same time that much.

When I unconsciously looked up at the sky, I saw a small bird dancing high above. But it was not black. It was not Crow.

“...No, nothing is wrong. My apology. My hand slipped.”

Al, who was near me, called the maid and watched her skillfully tidy up the broken cup. While I felt my pulse was echoes loudly like it was violently rousing up, my head cooled down and calmly convey the fact that this development was the beginning. If I leave my seat, if at that timing I slowly rise while saying “I’m feeling a bit unwell, would it be alright with you if I take my leave first?”, then Soleil will frown with an increasingly dubious expression. If other people saw it, it’s not a change big enough to deduce this, but for me who have only been watching him since our childhood, I perfectly understood every of Soleil’s emotions. Furthermore, the span of time spent watching him was not limited to this life only.

“Big sister, are you alright?”

I noticed that the cup I dropped when Soleil was exchanging his greetings, had cut apart the gentle mood that was flowing between them. My little sister has not sat down yet. “Soleil-sama, please take care of Silvia.” When I said that, his expression immediately slackened and he turned to face my little sister. “I apology”, he said and, in my stand, he lowered his head and pulled the chair for her. “No, that, it is I who should apology” replied my little sister who has become flustered and whose cheeks have been dyed red. While her beauty has snatched away everyone eyes, when I urged Al with my gaze, he took my right hand to escort me. I didn’t think that him, as my

escort, would do such a boorish action in front of Soleil who was my fiancé, but in this situation even Soleil probably wouldn't rebuke him. Besides, there is no doubts he was no longer paying me any mind. While keeping Soleil who was fixedly staring at the round cheeks of my little sister at the corner of my eyes, I left my seat. Not knowing how many times I saw that scene that kept being repeated, I dropped my gaze. When Al whispered "My lady" in my ears, I realized my feet had stopped.

As I grasped my heart that was assailed by pain similar to a strong cramp, I felt like I could have carved out my chest with a knife. Why am I like this? Why don't I tire of being hurt again and again?

When I saw the worried face of Al who was looking at me, I suddenly remembered. In one of my previous lives, I took his hand and eloped. At the beginning I stubbornly rejected his hand, but, after experiencing lives where I got relentlessly corned over and over again, I felt into a clear despair and took his hand at last. If it has been a romance novel like the ones that are flourishing among the commoners, it would have become the kind of love story all young maidens were reading with captivation. A forbidden love with an escort, it would be narrated under that perspective. However, Al and I were not in love. Al was just feeling pity for me. Moreover, he was a person who would carry out his loyalty.

Right, loyalty.

I knew that if I run away from my parents' home before marring Soleil, I could never come back. The fact that in each life, we got married after I graduated from the academy was neither out of I nor Soleil's own volition. Everything was controlled by the marquis house. The earl's daughter called "Ilya", seemed to be much more capable than what she herself thought, and when she was attending school, other families had tried to butted in and prevent her from joining the marquis house. Due to the reason their peerage didn't match, there had been houses trying to tear up the engagement with Soleil and tie a new marriage connection with him. That why, before things got more troublesome, the marquis house hastened to take me in and it became a ceremony that had been coercively and hastily advanced under their arrangement. However, I didn't harbor any particular dissatisfaction with that. Rather, I was delighted to become Soleil's wife as soon as possible. So, even if I didn't do anything, the preparations for my marriage with Soleil favorably moved forward.

I wonder why I abruptly thought that if I must flee, it was now or never. I think, I just thought that I had to flee. *"My lady, please state your wish. Please, chose to take this*

hand." Was it his sincere gaze that moved my stubborn heart, or had that time simply come? Because Al told that I was more important than anything else in this world. I may have thought it wouldn't be bad to believe these words. Or maybe, my heart had been worn out by those repeating lives and could not make the correct decision. When Soleil's heart started to incline toward Silvia, I chose to get away from them. Even though I thought I could never do such a thing, but after having made up my mind, all that was left was to polish a plan. It should have been a plan carefully prepared. But an unexpected situation occurred. What Al and I lacked, was probably the ability to ascertain every and any single details with a discerning eye. We run away together in the middle of the night, borrowing the help of several people, we tried to leave the town, and were surrounded. When I learned those people were the proteges of the marquis, I was already in a situation where I couldn't move. They were thoroughly prepared and payed no attention to mine and Al's resistance. That's was natural. They were the so-called marquis's intelligence unit. The dark side of the nation. Such a thing as capturing Al and me, for the unit mainly in charge of assassination, it was even easier than twisting a baby's neck. It's not that Al was weak. He worked as an escort knight. His real ability was guaranteed simply by the fact he was serving my earl house. But he couldn't fight equally with humans from the dark side whom had been killing people as a living.

As if it was natural, Al stood before me. To protect me. As if to say it was his duty as an escort. And then, in front of me, he was slashed and died.

"At this late hour, if you abandon your obligations, I'll be troubled." The marquis's wife who came to visit me after I returned home said that with the same calm smile she had the first time we met. *"It's not like you've grown up this far by yourself, right? It's not just your parents who have raised you to become the next marquis's wife. For that purpose, our house has also devoted its power, hasn't it? Most of your education expanses were burdened by our house. Did you know that?"* The marquis's wife who only stated facts in a detached tone leaned her face that looked at lot like Soleil's toward me and added, *"You have to properly understand that there is no replacement for you."* Indeed, I never thought that the unit called the marquis's dog would move simply to search for me. In the end, I, who couldn't foresee that far ahead, had been too swallow. The bride of a marquis eloping was a big scandal in the high society. The aristocratic society was most concern about appearances and dignity after all.

And then, Al, as the person who had lend his hand for the elopement, was labeled as the main criminal for instigating the whole affair. In the first place, Al's direct employers were my parents. Al, who tried to release me betrayed the earl house.

That's why he was mercilessly cut down and sacrificed. I was not allowed to express the slightest vindication. It was too late to say that I was the one who planned everything, that it wasn't his fault. Because he had already died.

"Because he died protecting his master, he fulfilled his long-cherished ambition as a knight, right?"

The marquis's wife laughed with an extreme satisfaction. Her words were right in a sense. Because, he had wished to live as a knight and die as a knight. His wages were indeed paid by the earl house, but he had said that I *"was his only master."* He said he had no intention to obey anyone else. In my former life, it had also been the same when I requested him to protect my little sister rather than me. Because it was my command, he reluctantly protected Silvia while gritting his teeth. Since he did it while showing a frustration that came from the bottom of his heart, I think I ended up misunderstanding Al's kindness. Before I knew it, I came to believe he was existing for my sake. I lost him in my first life, after that I exerted myself to keep him away. Perhaps it was because I had foreseen I would lose him someday. That's how my former self used to be. And yet, I took him along with me.

".....I'm Alfred's fiancé. No, I was his fiancé."

A few days after that runaway drama, I, who had naturally been restrained, had a visitor. It was a young woman. From her clothes I could tell she wasn't from the aristocracy, but probably the daughter of a merchant. Their design was trendy and they were decorated with many frills that were all the rage with town girls recently. However, none of that suited the dark color of the cloth that reminded of a mourning dress. No, it was wrong. That woman *was* definitively wearing a mourning dress. The reason why it wasn't clear whether or not they looked like mourning clothes, was because that woman was still his fiancé and had yet to become his legal wife. In other words, she was still a stranger who was only scheduled to become a family member. It was different from grieving over the death of one's own family member.

"Were you aware of my existence?"

She was still a young maiden with adorable features. Al is older than me by five years,

so she may have been around the same age as I. She should be 17 or 18. Despite it, she was exulting a composed air. It was maybe because of her deep grief. Her little face scattered with freckles stared at me fixedly. It seemed her pair of eyes which contour was tinged with red was blaming and sentencing me. Even though she had asked me if I knew her, she didn't wait for an answer before she said,

"Alfred and I had planned to get together once your life had settled down. We had such a promise."

She said she didn't know how many years it would take but she intended to wait, then she covered her eyes. Her tears gently felt on her hands that were tightly grasped on top of her knees. She took in consideration both my situation and Al's, anything and everything, yet how deep must have been the determination of the young girl who still decided to wait? Even if she didn't have the appearance of nobles, from her clothes I could guess she was from a wealthy family. A woman born in such a family bears the duty of connecting two houses through marriage. Al and her probably got promised to each other to gain such a tie. But Al chose the path of running away with me. Because I wanted to. It was impossible for him to reverse the decision of the one and only master he chose. That's why she also must have made her own decision. She had no other choices but to decide. She planned to choose Al, she planned to abandon her family. That's how much thoughts and feelings she put into it.

Ah, dear Lord. I, what did I, do? What the earth, did I do?

I knew that words such as "I'm sorry" held no meaning. I was always on the side of those who got things stolen from them. That's why I knew such words would not provide her the slightest bit of relief. *"Can it be that you, you think that you're the only one unhappy.....?"* At that moment, I remembered Crow's words.

"Alfred was pitiful. Because he made you his master, he died....."

Although her tears that kept trickling down looked transient, the strong gaze aimed at me pierced my chest. I didn't know. I didn't know the slightest thing. I was not even aware of the fact Al had a fiancé. No, it's wrong. I didn't even try to know. Because Al knew everything about me, I was under the impression that words were not needed

between us. And then, I rested on my laurels and took Al's gentle words for granted, and I relied on the hand that must absolutely never be grasped. Because of that, Al died. I stole Al from her.

Ah, I wonder how foolish I am.

.....What happened after that, I don't remember it well. Just that the high society wasn't particularly kind toward a noble woman who had attempted to elope once. Even though I intended to lay low, before I knew it I was in a bed of thorns, and worse than that, the attitude of Soleil who didn't hide his disappointed look never ceased to hurt me. His cold eyes no longer reflected my appearance, and our line of sight never met. I couldn't reach out for his hand when we were walking, our fingers didn't even touch each other's.

I recall his voice when he said, *"Even though I'm the one that was abandoned, why are you making such a pained expression?"* I think in this life, Soleil and Silvia didn't remain married for life. But, as expected, I can't remember well.

.....The next one, the next one for sure, I have to carry through by myself. That's what I thought while thinking back on my previous life.

And so, in my life that turned back once again, I planned my elopement.

Chapter 13

The Third Life and Thereafter (5)

"You have to properly understand that there is no replacement for you." I remembered the words told by the marquis's wife. For that reason, first, I started by raising a person capable of becoming my replacement. While affecting a casual manner, pretending nothing was wrong, while being easygoing, to my gentle little sister, to Silvia, I taught everything I had learnt so far by pretending it was a training in homemaking arts. It may have been harsh to do this to her who didn't even have a fiancé. From a third person's perspective, it may have seemed like I was bullying her, and indeed, that was what said the maids. However, when I told her it was necessary for the sake of her future, only Silvia slightly narrowed her eyes and soon started to laugh with a joy that came from the bottom of her heart.

"I, until today, I felt like I was already dead."

My little sister looked at me with eyes that weren't the slightest bit clouded. The words she assembled together in a breath sounds like they were carrying a feeling of exhaustion. *There is nothing I can do about my weak body, at best all I can try to improve it is to take a daily stroll. Even if I want to chat a bit, because it will tire me out it's prohibited. I'm being carefully and preciousely protected, I was told that it was alright to not do anything so I must live, but on the other contrary it felt like I'm gradually dying,* said Silvia while crying softly. And then she grasped my hand and told me "Thank you." Yes, she said thank you. I, who replied there was no need for thanks and addressed a smile to Silvia, I wonder how long I can keep my pretended coolness.

All the time, the principle that governed my conduct was my self-interest. I wanted to stand beside Soleil. I couldn't bear to be looked with scorn and disdain by his eyes. I couldn't bear to die alone and lonely, neither could I endure somebody putting all the blame on me, I was fed up of being always condemned at each end of my life. That's why, to not let this happen, I tried to save Silvia. It was the same in all my lives. Even this time it was probably the same. It wasn't for her sake. I was only persistency doing the things that must be done for my own sake and self-interest. However, it was the

first time something like guilt shown through my feelings. As I watched my little sister's cheeks flushed red with joy when she stared at me, I knew I was the one that made her shows such an expression, and I came to think this time was the first time I truly acted like an older sister.

This child will one day steal Soleil from me.

Because I've always known it, while on one hand I set the goal of saving her, in reality on the other hand, I wondered *why must I save her* and felt kind of conflicted. Unnoticed, this gave birth to a distance between my little sister and me, or rather, I behaved like I wanted to stay away from her. It wasn't only my parents and our servants who said she must be locked up in her room because her body is frail. My parents and our entourage were surely worried about my little sister, but I was different. It was simply because I felt at ease thinking that as long as she stayed quietly in her room I wouldn't have to meet her. I was always looking for a legitimate reason to stay away from my little sister.

If I must ponder about when I start to think like that, it's probably at that tea party as expected. Until that moment, Silvia had been my cute, one and only little sister.

Tightly grasping my hand, Silvia said with a weakened voice she has been lonely all that time. While watching her listless profile, I vaguely felt that the time to face each other might have come. I knew that Silvia whose body was said to be too frail to bear children could get pregnant. In other words, like me she also had the qualifications to marry into a noble house. An earl house with a third court rank was not of a high standing but as a noble family its status couldn't be criticized and more than anything Silvia ephemeral appearance was generally widely appreciated. Originally, the future of my little sister should have been secured. There should have been many men willing to be adopted into our family with pleasure, and even if Silvia were to leave the house the succession wouldn't be that much of a problem. Since I married into the marquis house, in the worst case that Silvia would pass away due to her illness, it had been decided that our father's younger brother who was quite apart in age would inherit the title. If Silvia had been healthy, then there would have been no element in her life she could have been dissatisfied with.

In my case, the status of Soleil's family was too high. Surely, because various coincidences piled up and the position of being his fiancé felt on my lap, I desperately clung to it. Because I knew the only way to stand beside him was by being his fiancé. It might have been different if we were of the same sex. If Soleil had wished for it, I

could probably have become an ordinary friend. But we were of the opposite sex, if I didn't become his fiancé staying by his side wouldn't be permit. Being a marquis's son was that high of a social position. But maybe, all that discord occurred because I was the one who became Soleil's fiancé.

If the other party had been Silvia?

Soleil would surely volunteer to protect her himself. No matter what anyone else told him, there was no doubt he would have cherished and protected her to the end, wrapping her in silk layers as if she was a frail porcelain doll. Even if his beloved Silvia was dragged into danger because of the fact he was endowed with the social position of being just below royalty, he wouldn't let anyone get away with endangering her, and would always be at her side guarding her from harm. I'm sure he can do this. Even if I'm not here to protect her.

After all this time I reached that conclusion.

"I will do my best, big sister. To the extend you'll feel proud of me..."

The thin fingers of my little sister who grasped her pen wrote down the formula inside the notebook. For the sake of learning the territory administration economics cannot be skipped. Silvia said she wasn't good at calculation, but she was persevering hard enough. I wanted her to at least memorize the languages of the friendly neighboring countries and when I invited a foreign language teacher, she happily started to learn the new vocabulary. At first, it was probably a big mental burden for her, who didn't have any occasion to meet with people outside of our family and employees, to request to be taught by strangers. But Silvia whose big eyes sparkled in happiness was not afraid to learn. Until late at night, she would review what she had learn during the day, and even if the number of times her lack of sleep caused anemia weren't few, I thought it wasn't a bad sign. I didn't know Silvia was the kind of person capable of putting in that much efforts. The kinder I treat her, the more cheerful Silvia became. There were days where she was sickbed as usual, but they were remarkably less than before. The personal doctor of the earl house had twisted his neck in wonder and made the following diagnostic, "until now there probably was the effect of some mental depression." Silvia had been said to be too much frail to be able to live long. This may have already become a thing of the past.

And then, Soleil frequently watched over Silvia and I who got closer and looked intimate at first glance. On the bright face I didn't manage to see a single time in all my piled-up lives, his pairs of eyes were narrowed in tenderness. Just by slightly decreasing the distance between Silvia and me, he completely changed his hardened expression. "You two really get along well" he said while moving his sight toward Silvia whose cheek had reddened as she was dreaming of the future. That figure that looked at my little sister with a deep love is similar to a figure I saw somewhere, sometimes.

Soleil falls in love with my little sister. My little sister seizes Soleil and her happiness. Then, me..... what about me?

In these lives of mine that seemed to change but where nothing really changes, I feel like I'm drowning and my breath is blocked. In all this suffering too, there is surely some sense.



The day I slipped out of the mansion, it was raining.

Unlike last time, I coiled a black overcoat around me to blend with the darkness as I sneaked away. I packed up enough clothes to last a few days in a small bag and brought along jewels that could be exchanged for cash. The money I had prepared beforehand was in my underwear, the daily necessities could be bought anywhere, so bringing almost nothing with me I run to the place where the person who would act as my guide was waiting. Probably nobody noticed I slipped out of the mansion. The reason for this was because my wedding with Soleil would be in two days, as such both mine and the marquis's houses were pressed for time due to the preparations and had no room to spare to anything else. The guard was really lax, I very easily managed to sneak out. In order to make Silvia become my substitute, I had judged it was probably best to flee that day. After all this time it was impossible to cancel the wedding ceremony, so our earl house would have no other choice but to offer an alternative. The only suitable person, was my little sister Silvia. The situation was different from the previous time I eloped, she had got through education to become a bride. Our parents will probably be able to keep their pride. The marquis's house too, as long as there was a bride, would decide to ignore me. Even my escort knight Al who had to throw away his life because of the previous me, while he might be a little criticized for letting his master run away under his very noise, but it will only be that. At least it won't become a situation where his life is stolen. Because anyhow, he didn't know a single thing about the plan itself. I made all the preparations by myself, from beginning to end I never

consulted Al for anything. If I had only been a normal teenager, I probably wouldn't have been able to think of all this. Because I was born and raised as an aristocrat, nobody would have think I could run away, disappear in the streets and live there.

However, I had memories. Memories of a great number of accumulated lives. I have repeated the same time, made mistakes again and again, and I've finally found my resolution. The resolution to run away from here, the resolution to distance myself from Soleil. *If it's now I can do it*, was what I thought while I casted away everything. Feeling as if I had grown wings, I felt into the delusion that I could escape from that misfortunate fate. I was convinced that I could carry through this time for sure.

That's probably why it turned out like this.

Rather than tumbling and falling down the stairs, it felt more like being pushed off a cliff. I took a step forward thinking there was a footpath but there was no ground at the tip of my feet, and before I realized that I was falling, my body was already thrown at the bottom of the abyss. I just left my heart behind at the top of the cliff and felt down.

I don't know who the traitor was. The previous time we run away, Al found our cooperators by himself. They were probably either his knight comrades or close friends he could trust. But this time I didn't borrow the help of these persons. Because knights entrusted their lives to each other, they were especially united. If you sought the cooperation of any one of them, there was the possibility that this plan would become known not only by Al but also by Soleil. So this time I requested the help of one of the trustworthy merchant who we frequently commerce with. Was it a mistake in the first place? Or was it one of the men he asked for help who betrayed us? Anyway, before I knew it I was detained by a slave trader. All my possessions were torn off me and handed over to someone, at that time nobody would believe anymore that I was a noblewoman. That was natural. Because it was improbable for a young lady of a noble family to be alone in the middle of the city without any escort. Changing my clothes partway to mingle in the streets was a poor move. My jewels and money were stolen, of course. My hair and my body were dirty because of the rain that was falling when I run away, and because I feared being tracked down I didn't bring anything that could prove my identity. Everything worked in a negative direction. Now that Silvia had become my substitute, there was nobody who would try to locate me. After having been resold and resold again and again no traces were left, and nothing could prevent me from falling down to the place called the lowest of all brothels. Just by the fact I had flee, I had thrown mud at my parent's home. After having done such a thing I

couldn't seek their help. Although I think I cried at first, unable to call anyone's name for help, I started to wait for time to pass. As my body and flesh were violated, my heart and mind too, were snatched away.

I was alive, but dead.

Losing your mind and heart was like that. I didn't think, I never dreamt, I probably never hoped. I became unable to remember for what reason I had tried to run away. But, I also remember this intuition. Somewhere inside my head, I thought that I will repeat it again.

.....The clanking sound of porcelain striking against each other disturbed me as I was originally drifting into a swallow sleep.

On the other side of the stained sheets, on top of the lone and desolate bedside table, a glass of water placed on a cup was shaking. Reflect on the surface of this glass, was a face that had lost its color, a face that brought me an impression of déjà vu. It was probably because it was the expression I saw reflected on the mirror that I looked at just before I died in my former life. I no longer knew for how long I have been living here in that manner. Far from counting the passing days, I didn't even keep track of the time as there was nothing to show the hours here. It was the lookout outside of the room that measured the fee due each hour. We were not given the slightest bit of freedom. Even the liberty of knowing the time didn't exist here.

"Drugs."

Maybe because I seemed unlikely to move, the quiet voice impatiently urged me to take them. I stayed lying on the bed and only raised my eyes, but when I did so, I saw a boy looking at me, half his body leaning over me. He seemed to be around 4 or 5 years old. A pair of black eyes was set on his white face, his hairs were black like Soleil's, his slender neck was tilted diagonally; one by one I checked his outward features and confirmed they matched the description of the person that was on my mind. (Crow). I didn't manage to say the word, the name of that person disappeared when it reached the tip of my lips. The gesture of bending his neck as he peered fixedly into my eyes was completely the same as the adolescent Crow. I knew that he could freely change his appearance, but I didn't know he could also liberally change how old

he looked. Naturally at first, I thought it was my own imagination playing tricks on me. That it was someone else who accidentally resembled him. No matter how much their face looked the same, he was much younger than the Crow I knew, since he was a child it was unlikely for him to be the real person himself. It was easier to conclude he was a relative or something like that. He was completely different from the Crow who I spent time with at the same moments in my previous life. But Crow was Crow. There was no doubt. Although the Crow of this life hadn't even told me his name.

“Can you get up?”

He gently put his hand on my back to support me and I finally could rise my body up a bit. Crow unwrapped the red powder medicine and placed it on top of his little hand. I knew that it was surely expensive and the boy must have secretly procured it from somewhere. I didn't say it out loud because Crow probably didn't want me to know about it. He didn't even demand money in exchange. The boy who appeared from nowhere as soon as I got sick, had probably been observing me from somewhere just like how he did when we met in one of my previous lives. He appeared in that cavern-like-brothel while claiming he was my caretaker and took residence in my room as if it was the most natural thing. But no one else seemed to know about him. To begin with, in this kind of place there was no occupation like caretaker. Because prostitutes of the lowest of lowest grade like us were not considered as human being. But Crow wasn't introduced by anyone and before I knew it he was here, taking care of me.

“Drink even if it's only a bit” said Crow with a sullen face as I kept my mouth closed no matter how much time passed. When I involuntary laughed because it was unusual for him to make that kind of expression, he put the edge of cup at the gap of my lips which had opened slightly. While coughing several times, I finally managed to drink some water and swallow the drug. My throat felt weak. One I started coughing it wouldn't stop, my chest made an unpleasant wheezing sound. Today too customers will surely come. I must manage to recover and get up somehow. When I mumbled and moved my tongue on which remained the bitter taste of the medicine, suddenly, Crow climbed on my bed. As I was wondering what he would do, he kept quiet and lied down beside me. Then, he clutched my stretched-out hand. His hand that didn't transmit warmth as usual felt comfortable, probably because I had a fever. I understood that feeling physically exhausted after taking some medicine meant my fever was high. Even though there was the possibility to catch this unknown illness, the fact that customers would still come visit this room showed how humans' lusts

were truly endless.

“Ilya, is there anything you want?”

At the time I was swept away in human traffic, I was told to throw away my name. At first, I did so and changed names a few times. Then when I arrived here I started using my real name. I threw my family name. But, no matter what, I couldn't bring myself to give up my first name. Once again, a childish voice called out “Ilya.” The pair of black eyes was seizing me, in the tiny room devoid of window and dominated by a deep silence, they just continued to stare at me. I knew they were pressing me to answer, but in truth it had already become too tiresome to even utter a single word. That's how weak I had become, and I almost wanted to fall asleep at once.

“Hey, Ilya. Should I lend you a hand?”

Inside my dozing off consciousness I heard Crow gently murmuring this. The first time we met, Crow certainly asked me the same question. Then, he became my hands and feet exactly like he said he would and he lent me his help for all kind of things. However, this Crow was not the Crow of that time. There was nothing to wish from the black bird that had taken the appearance of this boy. He certainly was a bird portentous of ill omen. However, in a world where only calamities existed, that was no longer a misfortune.

“Why, why, why am I the only one, why is it only to me that things like this.....”

That day where I was loaded on a carriage like goods, with both my hands and feet restricted. I, who was lamenting over all the lives had I experimented until then and over the current one, was told by a girl who had been similarly caught, “...*You're not the only one.*” Yes, her stagnated and dispirited gaze silently told me this.

That's right. I wasn't the only one. Being deceived, caught, sold, dealt with like I was a thing, piled up on a carriage like a luggage. Traded for money. I wasn't the only one who was restrained by chains and sold.

But surely, the only one who couldn't escape from this hell, was me and me alone.

Silvia was surely living happily under Soleil's protection. Without being attacked by a band of thieves, without collapsing in illness, she'll give birth and raise a child, and fulfill her duty as the wife of the marquis. That child was surely laughing. I set that stage and run away. I know that Soleil slightly slacken his cheeks just by looking at that child. I know it. Because it has always been the case. In a place where I'm not, Soleil and Silvia are probably staring at each other in happiness.

That's why, I'll remain like this, in this pitch-dark place, I'll stay here forever.

Chapter 14

The Third Life and Thereafter (6)

“.....M-my Lady!!”

Along with the loud echo of the door being thrown opened, I heard the scream of a man.

My eyes moved from the head of golden hair at the tip of my field of vision to the other corner of the room where a boy was standing. Now, what time is it? What was I doing? Why was Crow in that place? Due to the medicine my consciousness was cloudy and I couldn't collect my thoughts. Crow sprawling on the bed together with me, when was it again? A few hours ago? A few days ago? Or was it several months before? How much time has passed since then?

“Aaah! Aaah! Oh God...! Oh God...!”

Suddenly a floating sensation at the bottom of my stomach made me feel uncomfortable. Understanding I was held up in someone's arms, I tried to move my legs to resist but I couldn't. Because the bed sheets were wrapped around me. Maybe because the man who was lamenting over something was trembling and sobbing convulsively, his heartbeat that was echoing in my ears was particularly fast.

“For you to be in such a place...!! Let's go home, my lady...!”

Being called my lady several times made me feel painfully nostalgic and I remembered that even I had a time where I was called like this. That this man's voice sounded familiar, was probably not my imagination.

“A... l...?”

“!”

When I muttered that name, the big arms that were supporting my body shook greatly.

“I’ve come, to pick you up, my lady... that I’m so late, I’m really, truly, sorry. I’m so sorry...!”

While looking at Al’s face who kept bitterly apologizing for his mistakes as he grinded his teeth in mortification, I thought of the months and years that have passed by. The Al who was a young that I remembered was no longer here. “Let’s go home, my lady...” hoarsely whispered Al in a soft voice to soothe me. As if going home was the natural thing to do.

Going home, go, home, ho-me? I bend my neck while mouthing that foreign vocabulary whose meaning I utterly couldn’t comprehend. For me there was no place I could return to. Where on earth does he intend to take me to? After all this time, where on earth? In that state that was like being restrained, I could only let my eyes wandered around the room and when they reached its corner, they captured the figure of Crow as he was concealing his breath.

“Cr (ow),”

I tried to called out his name but swallowed down my words. I don’t know his name yet. The boy has not said his name even once. When I blurred out air instead of words, Crow, aware of my unsaid call or nor, put a thin smile on his lips and said,

...Good for you, right?

It certainly sounded like a voice, but Al didn’t notice and was about to leave the room. No, that’s not it. It’s not that he didn’t notice, rather Al couldn’t see Crow’s figure at all.

“...A... l, wa... it, wait...”

“It’s alright. My lady, you have nothing to fear. Your room was left as it was. Everything

stayed in the same place. You can go back to your previous life, as if nothing happened.”

“Wr... ong...”

That’s wrong, Al. That’s not what I’m trying to say. Wait, please. I want to talk to Crow. I can’t go anywhere, put me down, please, put me down.

Because of my illness every single of my organ was not fulfilling its function properly. I didn’t even have enough strength to vibrate my vocal cords. When I tried to raise my voice, my lungs felt like they were torn apart. And so, I couldn’t voice my feelings and transmit the words I wanted to say. They probably won’t reach Al who looked like he was murmuring to himself in indignation. All I could do was directing my sight toward the inside of the filthy little room that was getting farther and farther away, toward Crow who was looking at me from there. His pitch-dark, pitch-black eyes that looked like they were refusing to reflect even light were appealing for something. Seeing this expression, I gained conviction.

Determining my identity, locating Al, telling him my whereabouts, that was all Crow’s doing.....

“Wait, Al, that child, Cro(w)... is... he’s... that’s child too... him too...”

Take him along. As if to deny those words the door of the room was vigorously opened. I could only look over Al’s shoulder as Crow was left behind.

“Al... Al...”

“It’s alright my lady. Now, everything is going to be alright.”

Al who wasn’t aware of anything replied in a gentle tone. But not a single word that I wanted to say, not a single meaning I wanted to convey was transmit to him. I think he probably wanted to leave this place as quickly as possible. And he took the initiatives need to do so. Al, who loudly shut the door probably didn’t have any ill will, but for me that action was like venting your anger for losing the place you could go back to. Over that closed-door Crow is here. If he wanted to, it would be easy for Crow to leave this

brothel. But he will not come out. I understood he will not come out and chase after me.

I saw his faintly quivering lips curved up in a little smile and said “Good for you.” That was surely his parting words. My arm that escaped from the restraints of the sheets reflexively stretched toward the door. My nails that Crow had trimmed short rubbed against the surface of the thin door. “...I never said, I wanted you to help me...” Even if I barely managed to utter those words, they’ll no longer reach Crow. The me in my previous life had certainly ask Crow to lend her his help. But, I, the present me, had never asked for help. Because it was fine to continue like this. It was fine to die like this with no one knowing about it. Cause, I believed that Crow would surely stay beside me until the very end.

As long as his figure was here, everything would have been fine.

.....And yet, why?



I felt around the gap between the fluffy sheets with my dried fingertips. Rolling my eyeballs that had almost become completely useless, I was expecting to find black hairs and wanted to remove them from the stainless clothes. His black hairs that didn’t possess any temperature felt pleasantly nice and cold, at some point I had started wanting to touch them because it made me feel comfortable. I wanted to ascertain that sensation again.

“Big sister...?”

Right beside me, catching her breath, my lovely little sister called out to me in an imploring tone. In my blurred field of vision was reflected the nostalgic colors of her white face and silver hairs. However, I couldn’t see clearly enough to read her expression. I could only guess she was surely making a worried one. *I’m sorry, I’ve made you worry.* That’s what I thought but I couldn’t put it into words. Only a long breath could leak through the gap of my dried lips. A considerate maid wiped up my lips with a moisturized cotton, but that action was meaningless. The inside of my mouth was hot like it was burning.

I already knew that my end was drawing near.

“...”

“What? Big sister, what have you said?”

When Al took me from the brothel, I thought it was surely to take me back to the earl estate, but for some reason I was carried to the marquis's mansion. There, Soleil and Silvia, together with their children, were waiting for my arrival.

The cave-like-brother where I had been was as remoted from the regions where the marquis's and our earl's houses were set up as heaven was remoted from earth. That place was a strange lawless area inside our country. In other words, it was a slum. It seemed that Al had been looking for me all those years, but he lamented over the fact that no matter where he went he couldn't catch hold of my whereabouts. During the journey to return to the marquis's mansion, he cried so many times, grieving and asking why he couldn't find me sooner. Everything was brought on myself due to my egotistical motive, Al hadn't commit the slightest wrongdoing, and yet when I convey this to him in broken and disconnected words, it seemed it didn't bring him any consolation. Apologizing seemed to only depress him even further.

Although we arrived at the mansion after several weeks of travel spent in that mood, at that time, I was already on the verge of death. Immediately the private doctor of the marquis's house came to examine me, but he diagnosticated that nothing could be done anymore. I felt that I heard his voice guessing I had a few days left at best.

“Big sister, can you hear me? I heard that, Soleil had something he wanted to talk to you about for a bit...”

I could no longer move the tip of my fingers, I could just shift my darkening sight and when I did so, I certainly felt that a person who appeared to be Soleil was looking over me. There were emotionless thin ice like eyes. Those eyes I felt in love with were beside me. But even when I tried to concentrate I couldn't read his expression. I could no longer distinct anything with my weak eyes.

“...Ilya, the whole time... I’ve hated you.....”

At the edge of my field of vision, stood two small shadows that should be their children. I wonder if they are worried for their parents. At the time I was brought to this mansion, the ones who showed the most discomfort were those two. Even though I can hardly see their expression, I understood this quite clearly. I had the feeling they harbored wariness toward the unknown person who suddenly appeared. I could comprehend why they wouldn’t accept a measly prostitute who, even as a form of flattery, couldn’t be called a noble female servant. Even if she was their mother’s blood related big sister. Besides Silvia, Soleil and also Al, no one could prove my identity. My appearance has probably totally changed. Yet, because Soleil and Silvia had received me as the person called Ilya, they had to accept this fact. I guess the reason the earl house didn’t receive me, was surely because my parent’s anger hasn’t lessened. I probably had been stripped of my position of being an earl’s daughter when I run away.

“You were suddenly gone, and I thought you betrayed me. From our childhood you were at my side, because we had sworn to become a married couple eventually, when you abandoned your duty and run away, I was engulfed by hatred thinking you were a heartless woman.”

“Do you know how hurt I was when Silvia told me you probably had someone you loved...? While you had promised to become my spouse, you didn’t trust me enough to confide all that distress to me.”

That was right. I had disclosed such a thing to Silvia. That I had someone I loved. That for his sake, I could do everything. That person was Soleil though, but..... Ah, I see. My escape led them to connect those thoughts like this.

“Because you were clever you probably noticed. That I didn’t love you. But, for that exact reason, I thought we could make things work well as husband and wife. With affection and friendship, I believed we could built a harmonious relation over time.”

Soleil's words that were like a monologue resounded inside the quiet room.

"All those future prospects, everything, was crushed by your departure."

The more I thought about it, the more I thought I hated you. So, even if I knew it was really difficult for you who was from a noble family to live in the streets, I deliberately left you alone. Soleil cut his words at this point.

I wonder if he wanted to say that I had reaped what I sowed.

I understood well what Soleil was trying to say. For him, his life was naturally his first and his last. He simply fell in love with Silvia, but he didn't betray me. He didn't love me, but at least, as my fiancé he tried to face me as sincerely as he could. That's why he found the time to come and meet me. For that sake he often appeared when Silvia and I were studying. Actually, it may have been only to see Silvia, but still he didn't do anything unfaithful. The one who betrayed was me, so the one who was hated was also me. No matter how many times Soleil betrays me in my accumulating lives, no matter how many times Silvia steals the person I love, no matter how many times I end with a violent death, it is irrelevant and has nothing to do with the him of the current life. Because he doesn't know. He doesn't know we can't achieve the ideals he pictured in his mind. He doesn't know that something like getting along well as a married couple, is impossible.

"Still now... I'm grateful to you. Because thanks to what you did I could build a family with Silvia....."

Soleil's voice was getting farther and farther away. Unlike the other lives, this time is different, Soleil is beside me, my little sister is here too. It's different from the time I died alone in despair while hearing the voice of a newborn, it's different from the time I chose to die by my own hands with a rope. It was not a prison here, I didn't suffer torture either. Overlooked by a stainless ceiling, gently wrapped in a brand-new bed, I wasn't freezing to death.

But, I should have die at that time where those black eyes where gently watching over me. I didn't want to die like this. In this place where everything is here, but there is

nothing.

The hand that I hold was cold, it didn't transmit any warmth to my lukewarm body, but I didn't need anything else. In that room where there was nothing, but surely, everything was there.

Crow.

Crow.

Why, are you not here now.....



“...Ilya-sama? What happened?”

I heard a soft and nice voice and turned around. Shaking her luxuriant blond hairs, Marianne frowned.

“...Ah, it's those two again...”

When we went to the school cafeteria for lunch, that place was a bit noisy. Looking over the direction of the commotion, I saw my fiancé and my little sister who were walking close together. As I was absentmindedly following their figures with my eyes, I heard whispering voices saying the two of them suited each other. For Soleil-sama, rather than Ilya-sama her little sister Silvia-sama was more suitable.

Marianne who had come together with me for lunch followed my line of sight and saw them.

“Irisa-sama, as expected, isn't it going a bit too far?”

Implicitly, with a tinge of criticism she was asking me if Silvia's conduct as a daughter of a noble was not good. She was indeed walking closely with a man who had a fiancé. Even if no one taught you, you should have known that such a behavior was not a

praiseworthy thing. However.

“...My little sister has a weak body, and because of it she wasn’t taught much about social etiquette...”

It was my role to say that and back her up. Because I was her big sister.

“Ilya-sama, as expected I’m getting tired of hearing that excuse. Besides, since you haven’t notice it, I’ll dare say this...”

“?”

“Your expression looks as if you’re about to cry you know.”

Marianne slender hand swept away my own hand which was tightly grasping a cup of tea on the table.

“Is it really alright to leave it as it is now?”

Don’t you love Soleil-sama?

I was hard pressed by her reply which was uttered softly wrapped in gentleness. The previous me certainly was in love with Soleil. And the me of the current life too, at the time she met Soleil, she fell in love with him. After that tea party, I couldn’t say that my love for him collapsed after watching Soleil and Silvia fell in love in front of my very eyes.

But.

But, something was not right.

Something, was different.

Chapter 15

The dream that the Soleil of this life sees is (1)

It's a dull iron color, she said as she casted down her eyes. Like an old woman's hairs.

He opened his mouth to say it wasn't true, but the words wouldn't come out. Contrary to his own intention, he sneered and said, "Indeed." Hearing this, she kept her gaze down and only her lips showed a little smile. Of course, it wasn't a smile of delight. But it neither felt like she was sad. Right, if it must be compared, it was a smile of resignation. It was the expression of a person who has already given up on everything and anything. I knew I should correct her, but as before, tasteful words wouldn't come out.

.....Why is it like this? This, this is, not like me. To hurt her. To make her show this expression. This, is certainly not me.

The faded green color of my eyes looks like the tinge of a leaf just before it withered, my parents too don't seem to like it. She laughed one more time. She took a little breath and asked me, *you don't like it either, right?* For a normal listener, her mutter might sound like a mere idle complaint. Like something that could be easily ignored. However, I immediately understood she wasn't expecting me to deny her. It wasn't like she wanted me to do so. She was pretending to ask me, but in reality, there was no need for an answer. Her behavior betrayed her thought that it was natural to reply with an affirmative. When I tried to ask why she needed to always depreciate herself so much, ultimately only a sigh left my mouth. It's not that I wasn't aware of the effect it would have, but I couldn't swallow that sigh. I certainly thought it was bad, but I couldn't take it back. She, who seemed to had been carefully waiting for my reaction, without showing the slightest sign of surprise, she strongly closed her eyes once, then soon she straightforwardly stared into my eyes without turning away.

Her eyes which seemed to radiate light were enough to overturn her assessment of herself.

That it's a faded green color, I never once thought such a thing. Certainly, it's a light hue, but I noticed that when you changed the angle, you'll see they were slighted blended with a trace of amber. I thought it couldn't be compare to anything else in the

world, they were the only eyes with such a color. When I catch a sight of her eyes, for some reason it makes me feel happy. Completely and thoroughly happy. I've always thought it was a mysterious color. But, I never conveyed this feeling into words, and while I thought now would be a perfect time to say it, my lips only grasped for air and my voice refused to come out.

Something, an unconceivable force that I can't begin to understand, is at work. I must say it. I must quickly say those words. If I don't do this, I'll lose her heart. Even though I knew this, my tongue refused to move as if it has been sewed.

"Ah, it's already this late. I have a lesson on courtesy now. Soleil-sama, please take your time. You see, this child will come too."

When I followed her gaze, I saw a young girl whose silver hairs were fluttering in the wind as she was walking toward us with a smile on her lips. The tea party that was hold in the garden of the earl's estate only had two seats facing each other. Can it be that, from the start, Ilya hadn't planned to stay? Indeed, she was trying to leave as soon as she finished the greetings, exchanging as fewer words as possible.

.....Why? That tea party, didn't you prepare it for the sake of your fiancé, for *my* sake?

As I tried to say that, I noticed that the young girl she had called "this child" had arrived right beside me. The girl's sight wasn't fixed on her older sister but rather on me, her sister's fiancé. Receiving her gaze didn't make my heart flutter... Although it certainly didn't, for an unknown reason a smile rose to my mouth. I'm not happy. It's not funny either. However, I can't help but feel happy. I can't help but feel amused. It was as if I was drunk.

"...It has been a while. How are you feeling?"

My lips that felt they were absolutely not my own moved to express words of concern for her. Meanwhile the distance between me and Ilya was increasing and yet, I couldn't chase after her. As if they were fixed on the ground, I couldn't even move a toe.

“Today I’m feeling particularly well. I don’t have a fever either.”

As the girl lowered her gaze in bashfulness with her cheeks died red, her long eyelashes cast a shadow over her rare purple eyes. Ah, what a waste. While wondering while I’m thinking such a thing, I lowered my body to peer into those eyes. When I saw my foolish face reflected in these clear eyes that twinkled mysteriously, my body felt drawn inside them as if a string within me had been plucked.

.....No, it’s not right. It’s not those eyes. I don’t want to be reflected in those eyes.

“...Big brother...?”

“...Didn’t I say it? It’s too early to call me like this. So, you know...”

Call my name. I heard a sweet whispering voice resounded from somewhere far away and my head ached.

This, what is it? I, what the hell am I saying?

I feel sick. It’s nauseating.

“...Soleil-sama?”

A fleeting and passionate gaze was raised toward me. I felt that I had seen that kind of gaze somewhere sometime, but, I simply stood stock still in blank amazement, not understanding the reason why it was directed at me. No, that what I thought but the next moment, with a slight hesitation I gently touched the girl’s thin shoulder.

“I don’t want your condition to degrade again. It’s better to sit down quickly.”

From my mouth overflowed a whispering voice that didn’t sound like mine. “Thank you”, she said and while I look at her sat down on the seat that I pulled without any hesitation, I stupidly thought that seat was originally for Ilya. Even though I couldn’t

even chase after her, what am I thinking? Meanwhile, the young girl who is Ilya's little sister was talking to me while laughing really delightfully.

.....Silvia. Ah, that's right. She is, my... my, my...?

"...Soleil-sama, thank you for what you're doing every time."

Her thin hairs that looked like they would melt in the atmosphere if you touch them were dancing in the air. The beauty of those hairs was praised by everyone. *It's because the maids carefully groom it*, she said while smiling like it's a trivial thing. *I'm also proud of it*, I added.

"Can I ask for what exactly you're thanking me?"

"...For being kind to me... Truly, I'm really thankful. Because Soleil-sama, if you hadn't come, I wouldn't be allowed to drink tea like this in the garden. Both my parents and my big sister are overprotective. They think I will become sick just from being exposed to the wind..."

"...Unfortunately, it's not only your parents and sister who think like this."

"Soleil-sama too?"

"Hum, that's right."

"Then, why...?"

"But I think a change of pace is necessary. It's better for you to go out more often. Seeing the color of the sky, feeling the earth, smelling the air, exchanging words and opinion with someone else, it's a lot better doing it than simply imaging it. This will at least become a reason for living."

Silvia who listened to my speech with a sincere look repeated in a mutter the words "a reason for living". And after a little while, she raised her gaze to look at my face with her wavering eyes.

“...could you become it? A reason to live.”

“Hum?”

“Rather than ‘someone else’, can’t it be you?”

The young girl said this with a dreamy expression. As if to adorn the background scenery, the large roses raised by their mother were in full bloom. With her transparent white skin slightly died red, the girl waited for my answer. Once again, words that have nothing to do with my own will are assembled arbitrarily.

“...Of course, Silvia.”

Because I will become your big brother. Although just some time ago I repudiated her and told her it was too soon to call me “big brother”, my own voice that said it shamelessly sounded slightly exalted. I thought it would be good to become her brother as soon as possible. I even thought that there would be no greater blessing than becoming Silvia’s reason for living. When Silvia smiled at me with a joy that came from the bottom of her heart, my own lips also loosened up. While wondering what kind of farce this was, I thought it would be great if this gentle moment could last forever. No matter how much I struggled, I could only become her “big brother.” But if I can be beside that girl, beside Silvia, then that would be plenty enough.

.....No. It’s wrong. Why? There is no way I would think such a stupid thing. Because, I, I, I’m Ilya’s fiancé.



“Hey, Soleil. Your fiancé, recently she hasn’t be well you know.”

A friend talked to me during our fencing training. Because my family standing was too high, people tended to keep their distance from me but he was a someone who was friendly with me despite this. I knew him since we were children and I was aware of his character.

“...By not being well, you mean?”

“It’s rumored she keeps in check every single woman who approach you.”

“...What?”

“Oh, so you didn’t know? It has become quite the rumor in the academy. Because your fiancé’s jealousy is scary, it’s better not to get close to you.”

My friend shrugged his shoulders and smiled wryly. *A woman jealousy is dreadful*, he said. While hearing his story without really listening to it, I was deep in my thoughts, feeling that something was out of place. It’s unbelievable that such a rumor existed, it didn’t sound like what my fiancé would do. There was no element to deny the rumor. Because it wasn’t like I knew everything Ilya was doing to the extent of being aware of every single of her move. However, the Ilya that I knew would obediently face forward without sparing any effort, on the other hand she shouldn’t have been a person who would get fixated on something.

“Your expression says you can’t believe it.”

My friend grinned with a nasty smile. As his eyes lightened up with a shrewd glare, he added, “But I’ve also seen that scene you know. It was really unsightly.” His remark showed his contempt for Ilya. At the second I flared up, ready to lose my cool, my mouth distorted in a queer shape like it was agreeing with him. It was probably a kind of sneering rictus.

.....Why was I making that expression? It’s my own emotions but I couldn’t control them. Even though I should be arguing she is not the kind of person who would do that, even though I should believe in her no matter who else doubt her, I couldn’t do it.

“Come to think of it, your fiancé seems to have a little sister, right? There is a talk about how the hidden princess of the earl’s house finally appeared in the high society.”

As I was grinding my teeth out of frustration because my body was acting contrary to my thoughts, the conversation changed topic in the meantime.

“Is she really as lovely as a fairy? It’s regrettable that she has poor health, but even my parents praised her and said she was well-behaved and had a good personality. I also wanted to meet her, but when it was time for her social debut, they hide her saying her health went down.”

Even though he had never seen Silvia in person, my friend kept talking about her as if he was lost in a dream. *With such beautiful silver hairs and purple eyes, maybe she’s not a fairy but a goddess!* I listened to him exclaimed this in a loud voice. Although I nodded with a collected expression, involuntarily I raised my eyebrows in a frown.

“Hey, what are you talking about?”

Attracted by his voice, the gazes of the people around us gathered in our direction. They were our fellow knight students. Maybe because he was in a good mood, my friend talked with them about Silvia. He didn’t conceal the fact that the beautiful girl who suddenly appeared in the high society was Ilya’s little sister. I also heard him narrate in an exaggerated tone that while Ilya and Silvia were sisters, their outward appearances were completely different. Regarding Ilya, his description gave the same impression as what he saw previously. As for Silvia, he talked about the impression his parents had of the girl they saw at a social gathering. Both contained a few exaggerations and dreamy statements, and they became different descriptions of the actual girls. Even though I should speak up and correct it, the inquisitive gazes turned in our direction seemed unlikely to repress their curiosity, like they were telling me it was useless to deny it. Moreover, I didn’t know what I should deny and how to do it. The other students who didn’t realize my mental dilemma came closer to listen to the rumored girl who was the topic of the high society. Eventually, I helplessly lowered my eyes to avoid their gazes.

What my friend was saying was incorrect but it wasn’t wrong. Silvia was certainly beautiful. Her glittering hairs particularly attracted people’s eyes, not to mention that her frail body aroused in others the desire to protect her. Her eyes which were like jewels, were of a mysterious purple color rarely seen in this country. It would be easy

to put this description into words. I could have also told my friend about it. However, as I was Ilya's fiancé, this wouldn't be allowed. If I were to do it, it would appear as if I had fallen in love with my fiancé's little sister. This wouldn't be good.

Besides, if I told them I had been in contact with Silvia before, instantaneously she will change from a product of one's imagination to a person of flesh and blood. I think it would be very dangerous. Maybe ill-intentioned fellows would try to approach that innocent girl.

That's right. Because one day I will become her big brother, I must protect Silvia.

Just a few days ago, I heard someone say, *"Soleil-sama is very kind. Silvia-sama was talking about it. That the one who prepared her dress for the evening party was him. It must have been quite difficult to prepare dresses for even the little sister of his fiancé. Both Silvia-sama and her parents were delighted by his thoughtfulness."* It's not that I didn't understand the meaning of their suppressed chuckle. I know their words included a sense of criticism for having overdone it. However, I thought it was alright like this. If that made Silvia happy. If that make the young girl who begged me to become her reason for living smile. Then, that would be truly fine.

.....No, wrong. What am I saying? Such a thing is impossible. There is no way I would think that. I can only think I've become crazy, something is wrong with myself. I, what the heck happened to me?

"Hey, hey everyone, won't you stop here? Look, you're bothering Soleil."

Although I clearly refused to talk about it, still, my classmates were trying to gather more information about Silvia until one of my friends raised his voice to stop them. Even though he had also been inside that ring of listeners since a while before, he made a call at this moment out of self-interest.

"Even Soleil is determined to hide this cute, cute little sister of his."

Those words felt to the bottom of my chest. Ah, that's right. I don't want to let anyone see her.

.....Ilya who I met after not having seen her for a while lowered her gaze and smile.

“...Thank you for always being so kind to Silvia.”

That distorted smile looked as if it would change into a crying expression at any time.

Several times a month, if there were no urging matters, it was agreed by both our houses to visit one of the mansions in order to deepen our friendship. It was only for a few hours, we only met for a few monotonous hours, but it wasn't tedious. Contrary to the other women who only enjoyed swallow conversations devoid of deep contents, exchanging words with this clever girl was a pleasant and fruitful moment. That's why, this time too, I was waiting in expectation for these hours.

“That you prepared a dress for Silvia... I, didn't know about it...”

However, at the moment our gaze met, she lowered her face immediately. It was the same reaction than at the first time we met, the same reaction than when she tried to hide she was shaken by a feeling of insecurity. While I noticed it, instead of worrying about her I shook my head and answer, *It's alright. Because one day we'll become family.* When I said that, Ilya raised her face to look fixedly at me, then she smiled again.

“For having Soleil-sama as my fiancé, I'm really blessed” Despite her saying this with a laughter, her expression didn't show the slightest trace of happiness.

Looking at her face, “what are you dissatisfied with?” such unreasonable words almost slipped off my mouth and were stopped just in time. I couldn't even understand properly what I was trying to say just now. When Ilya suddenly raised her head, I gazed at her big eyes which became even bigger and I remembered that I had criticized them

for their faded green hue. "...There is, nothing, I'm dissatisfied with" Her voice trembled unnaturally. I noticed that the words which should have been stopped had gone out of my mouth and I took a deep breath, but it was already too late. "Really, nothing." As I remained silent, Ilya thought my mood had been dampened and repeatedly correct it again. Looking like she was repenting, her fingers crossed before her chest became completely white. With how much strength must she clench her hands for them to end in this color? I noticed that her nails were digging into her flesh and reflexively tried to grip those hands but both my arms refused to move an inch, as if I was paralyzed. Even though I regretted my verbal slip, words to correct it didn't come to my mind. "If I have cause a misunderstanding, please accept my apologies."

As she was lowering her head I didn't know what kind of expression she was making. But I couldn't even urge her to raise her head.

Ilya is not wrong. She has done nothing wrong. Even though I knew I was doing something terribly cruel to her, I couldn't act like I wanted.

This, what the hell am I seeing? I, I, who am...?

No, *you*, who the hell are you?

Chapter 16

The dream that the Soleil of this life sees is (2)

“Wow, your wedding was really something. You know, your fiancé... no, she is already your wife now. I thought she was a strong-willed woman, but if she doesn’t speak, she doesn’t look that bad.”

There was only me standing beside my friend. I listened to him spoke without mincing his words and I smiled wryly. From the beginning, Ilya was a person of few words. But it’s probably useless to explain this to my friend who has already seen her frightening side. A part of him think Ilya is a person who regularly abuse others verbally.

“But once everything is thought and said, the best one is still Silvia-chan! She was like an angel!”

He clenched both his hand in excitement, and his loud voice attracted the glances of the people around us, exactly like that other time. The expedition of the chivalric order I belong to had ended and we finally had returned to our headquarters. I hadn't gone back home for several weeks already and my superior was laughing at me, saying I had it hard as a newly-wed. I was told that if I wrote a letter my wife would be pleased, but since the wedding ceremony, the two of us didn’t have a single conversation that sounded like one. Although I went to town to buy some writing paper that a woman would like, at the moment I put down the tip of my pen on that brand-new paper, my fingers became rigid. At the very least, I thought it would be alright to write down words inquiring about her health, but the ones I came up with only expressed concern about the state of the territory, it ended up being a businesslike letter asking her to take care of the well-being of the citizens. I couldn’t help but be shocked by the content that was like a written report. Originally, I didn’t have the intention to write something like this. I wanted to say something more personal, for example, in the area of the expedition, I saw the white flowers Ilya liked growing en masse and that sight was really beautiful. Or that when I went downtown, I found a hair ornament which would shine in her hair. That it was hard to submit the group of bandits but we somehow

managed to fulfill the mission. That the expedition was harder than what I had imagined but my friends supported me. Everything I wanted to say was really trivial, but I intended to make a list of all the things she probably wanted to know. And yet, the pen arbitrarily chose different words and put the sentences together. When I finally finished writing, fold the paper then put it in the envelope, the weight on my shoulders increased. Only a sigh leaked from my mouth. I felt that I spent most of my free time during this expedition writing letters. I did think it was bothersome. But I wanted to become “a good husband.” As a man I had the aristocratic duty of forming a political marriage, but I understood I couldn’t carry out that responsibility by myself.

I want to go home. I want to go home soon. When I’ll see her face, surely, the words will come to my mind naturally. The physical distance was surely proportional to the distance of our hearts. It must be that, surely.

.....However, somewhere inside my heart, there was also a part of me who thought it would be better to not meet her. When she’ll see me, she will surely lower her eyes. She has been doing that since long ago. That’s why I could easily imagine that scene. I knew that it’s not like she hated me, so I’ve asked her what was wrong. But, she had simply shaken her head a little and showed me a smile. “It is nothing”, she said. But on her gentle expression, another intention was hidden.

But the depth of that intention, its strength, I didn’t know them.

As I quietly looked out of the window, the cold moon was looking down on me. I’ll probably return to the mansion tomorrow morning. For some reason, when I closed my eye, I suddenly saw silver hairs. *I wonder how is Silvia?* Such a thought crossed through my mind. More than the face of my wife, more than the existence of my wife, what floated in my mind were those of that little sister. Although I was considerably disturbed by that fact, I realized during the expedition that I was only thinking about her. Then, another letter was written separately aside from the one for my wife. When a voice echoed inside my mind, telling me such a thing was wrong, I ignored it and continued writing. Sometimes I enclosed a pressed flower inside the letter, and I dreamed of the happy expression of that little girl. I shivered at the thought I pulled out something like that without the slightest hesitation even though I never did this for Ilya. Yet, I couldn’t control myself.

Because that child was my little sister. I justified my conduct by even preparing the excuse that it’s obvious I should be concerned about that person.

Unlike Ilya who can manage everything by herself, Silvia will look at me with a dependent gaze. I felt a sense of relief when I see the silhouette of the troubled girl who can't even stand up by herself. What is present here, is the ideal I pictured during my childhood. I wanted to become a person you could rely on. I wanted to be a strong person who could protect and cherish someone. However, it wasn't allowed for the person standing beside me to be someone weak who needed the protection of others. Governing a territory wasn't something easy. At the moment a weakness appeared, you would be scooped of your feet. That was why, I couldn't become the partner of that person who would become my weakness. My partner must be someone who think by themselves, who can express their will, stand on their own feet, who can stand up at the front in case of emergency and take the commands. That's why I chose Ilya. I chose her because it's a political marriage, but it wasn't the only reason. I was engaged with her since we were children, however, if her achievements to become the wife of a marquis weren't enough, the relationship could have been canceled at any time. She didn't know about it, nevertheless, she wasn't negligent in her efforts. I found her attitude of sincerely appealing that she liked me preferable, and while love seemed unlikely to bud, I thought trust could probably be given. It was practical and realist. I trusted her, and I should be trusted.

By living that way and accumulating days , we will become a genuine couple. I have vowed to do so. Even if love didn't bloom, at least, I thought we could become comrades in arms who leaned on each other backs. And yet.

Gachan!!!

When the pulled-out table cloth struck the floor, broken pieces of porcelain flew off in all directions. Ilya who was staring at them dumbfounded, unconsciously stumbled to reach out to them. No hand came to support her and she abruptly flop onto the floor. My face made an expression of scorn as I saw her appearance that could be called unsightly.

Silvia, died.

Faced with this fact, I couldn't suppress the violent emotion that boiled up from the depth of my body. Sadness only dominated me for a moment, after taking one deep

breath, I was immediately controlled by hatred. Inside my body a burning hatred and fury swirled forth. If I were to speak now, I could only spat out curses. Breathing out heavily like a best, I finally managed to say something.

“...You?”

You, did you kill Silvia?

The voice that said that seemed quite distant. As if the scene that was played in front of me was acted by somebody else. Nevertheless, Ilya who clearly showed a relieved expression when she heard Silvia was dead, made me comprehend the heart of the matter. Without thinking my hand which had seized a knife stiffened and I took a big step with the intention of stabbing it in her neck. If the steward hadn't thrown half his body forward to protect her, the point of the knife would have certainly pierce her pale skin. Having your mind goes blank was surely the situation that happened to me at that moment. “Master!” The voice of the steward was almost threatening and deprived me of my fighting spirit. The knife dropped of my fingertips, at the same time, my whole body was drained of its strength as if it couldn't bear that sense of emptiness. That I barely managed to not sit down was probably because as a nobleman, as a man, I retained a last trace of pride. I didn't know if I was relieved I didn't end up killing my wife, or if I was regretting I couldn't accomplish it. I trusted her. I intended to take care of her. I had faith in her as my wife.

When I thought that, I no longer wanted to see her face. That woman's complaining voice mixed with sobs seemed to follow me and it felt extremely unpleasant. Feeling nauseous as I caught sight of that woman's fingers reached out in my direction, I left the room while scolding my staggering feet. I have to go see Silvia. If that girl has truly died, at least I wanted to say a few parting words.

It's fine to condemn Ilya later.

I didn't intend to forgive that woman who murdered her little sister.

.....Wrong, wrong, wrong!!

Why, why did you reach that conclusion? *You*, what the hell are you saying? Ilya would never do such a thing. She is not the kind of person who can do that. Certainly, it was

hard to say she had her little sister in her heart. They were far from getting along well as sisters. But she didn't hate her to the point of wanting to kill her. Ilya, loves her little sister. That's right, I'm sure of it.

"Collect the proofs of the crime committed by Ilya. Don't miss a single one, gather everything."

When I gave the order to the steward who had chased after me, he replied immediately and disappeared. He'll probably start to work on it at once. He is an excellent butler. I could see that it wouldn't take long before the work could be finished. In the meantime, I have to proceed with the preparations to divorce Ilya. Murdering a member of one's family is a serious crime, although most noble couldn't get away from it, it was a different story for someone from a marquis house. To not let Ilya be protected by our court rank, I have to remove her from the family register and I also have to isolate her from her parent's earl house.

Wait, please wait. What the hell are *you* trying to do?

The girl who called me her reason for living was killed. That sin must be paid for.

Stop it, stop, stop it please...!!

I will show you a dreadful reality worse than death.

.....Why, why?

"...You... Why, are you so unjust, why are you going that far...? Even if it was for a short period, she was still your wife."

After having taken a leave from my affiliate knight order, I shut myself in the mansion. When I was compiling documents in order to apply for the divorce, my friend appeared with a grimacing expression like he was visiting someone ill. The man I had

not seen for a long time didn't have his usual cheerfulness. He was the man who insulted Ilya, my used-to-be-"wife". I smiled and said I was disillusioned by her unsightliness and how she abused others. Even you, weren't you infuriated when you heard she had murdered Silvia? That things have come to this, it's Ilya paying for her own wrong doings. It's not me who did this.

"Soleil, I... I can't bear to see you like this. Both you, and her."

Why won't you forgive her? My friend hung his head and muttered a few complaining words. Forgive? What are you saying? Are they any reason to forgive?

She had killed Silvia.

"Did you go see her even once? She is still believing, that you, will come pick her up."

The voice of my friend collapsed unnaturally. I thought he might be crying, but I didn't understand the meaning of his tears. When I bent my head in wonder, he looked like he saw something unbelievable and covered his face with his right hand.

"Do you plan to become a murderer...?"

I thought about the meaning of his inquisitive words said in a muffled voice, but I really couldn't understand. The one who was a murderer, was Ilya. Why do I have to be blamed? I'm doing the right thing.

The right thing.

Chapter 17

The dream that the Soleil of this life sees is (3)

Silver hairs were scattered on the white sheets. Like they were dyeing it. Certainly, while they didn't bear the slightest resemblance with that child's hairs, it still cannot be helped that they were somewhat similar. For me who lived in a world far away from reality, certainly, it looked like the color I was always yearning for. The eyes that looked up toward me were purple. While this color was rare in this country, in hers it's said to be common. It made me remember of the skin I could never touch, it reminded me of that child's... of Silvia's appearance.

The fact that Silvia who was rumored to be a fairy or an angel died became well-known in the high society the following week. Moreover, she didn't die of her illness but was murdered by robbers. The person who plotted it was her blood related older sister, the next marquis's wife. A tremendous commotion shook the noble society. Because I was often away from home due to my work as a knight, I left the social interactions to Ilya, so they were many nobles acquainted with her. Therefore, they needed to prove their innocence. In the case it was judged they had lend a hand to Ilya, there was the possibility they would be imprisoned. Even if it wasn't the truth, it was easy to fabricate a crime. The high society was always maintaining a perfect balance of the power relationships. On this occasion, some moved to try to crush the power of their opponents. Hence, in this situation the point of focus became our high ranked noble house. Originally, I just didn't want to forgive Ilya. I requested my parents' assistance, in order to condemn Ilya I laid all the groundwork possible and made every effort so that she couldn't run away from her crime. However, whether if it was because she came from a third-ranked earl family, or because she had the status of being a marquis's bride despite our divorce, cornering her required quite a considerable effort. Thanks to the cooperation of several people who used their influence to back me up, somehow, I was able to throw Ilya in the jails meant for the commoners.

When I finished doing everything, the season has gone around. Since I didn't hear that the sentence had been pronounced, she was probably still imprisoned. But, I was no longer interested in the future. She won't be able to avoid capital punishment due to the nature of her crime, but the execution of the sentence won't be carried out in

public. The central figures of the country won't allow the incident to be brought up again while it has already quieted down. I understood this already, and anyway, these days, I couldn't gather the energy to do anything and felt very tired. Due to this tiresome feeling of loss that I couldn't even put into words, I couldn't get myself to go to work, and lingered in my failure. For a superior officer, an extended leave was only a term hiding the fact he was in reality sentenced to house arrest.

In such a situation, there was a certain gossip that reached my ears. A silver hairs, purple eyes girl was working as a prostitute.

She had a small stature and slender limbs; her upturned gaze was pure and innocent, it was said her ephemeral figure was almost like a fairy.

The more I listened to the rumors, the more it sounded like Silvia. When I actually went to visit her, their features were as different as heaven and earth but still, it was enough to make me dream of that child. Above all, that innocent gaze that looked up toward me, reminded me of that child. Just seeing that figure was enough for me.

"Soleil-sama, I, I cannot live without you..."

"...could you become it? A reason to live."

Now, I felt that even if I heard it in a dream, I already couldn't remember the tone of her voice. The palm of my hand lightly sank in the thin and hard mattress of the cheap bed. When I absentmindedly stared at the girl's appearance in a dreamy state of mind, a black shadow fell onto us. When she turned away her eyes from me, those big eyes opened wider and she raised a little scream. I followed her line of sight to turn around and saw the tip of a sword above my shoulder. The owner of that sword lurched forward. When I rolled on the bed while protecting the girl and fell down, an impact shot through my shoulder. My back banged on the floor before being assailed by pain. Then I noticed that leather shoes were stepping on my shoulder.

"...Nice situation there, Soleil-dono. Going to the brothel during daytime?"

Behind the man who was looking down on me, a faint light glowed. Because of it, I couldn't see his expression clearly, but I remembered that flickering blond hairs. *Why?* My muttering voice echoed in the room that had fallen silent.

"Did you think I died? Unfortunately, fellow knights have a strong sense of camaraderie. My friends saved me"

I felt a sense of discomfort in front of that figure who was laughing fearlessly. Was he a man who would laugh like this? Was he a man who would talk with that kind of tone? Was he a man who would glare at someone like this? His eyes which were of a much deeper color than mine, should have been warm and gentle like the clear surface of a lake. I have always felt they were completely different from my eyes which were said to be cold and indifferent even when I was happy. Those eyes of mine always kept at the edge of their vision his figure which was lurking around her, ready to protect her at anytime.

"Say, do you know how many efforts that person made for your sake? Ah, that's right. Of course, you know. Because your entourage must have told you. That to become your spouse, she persevered with all her might... But, it's not like you saw to what extend she exerted herself."

In his sharp glare, the warmth that existed formerly was nowhere to be seen. The pupils that used to be filled with a deep affection were tinged with a murky shadow and at any time now it seemed they would be swallowed by darkness. The man to whom those eyes belong to, continued to narrate in an indifferent voice devoid of any intonation.

"In order to study foreign languages, or to learn territory management, or to acquire the etiquette expected from a lady, she didn't spare any time to sleep. Any number of times I've seen her figure as she threw up in the middle of the night. That figure that was even afraid to call out to people, was much ghastlier than her said sickly little sister. Her throat was burnt due to vomiting over and over again, and before she became aware of it, she had lost her clear voice."

Have you seen the dictionary she had? The space between the lines was blacken by her writing. After having read it over and over again, the edge of the pages of that book on management were worn-out. Did you know about the pen-mark on her fingers? About the shadow under her eyes that wouldn't quite vanish? About her reserve of stomach medicine?

Have you ever seen even one of those things? He asked and his foot on my shoulder increased its weight. When my upper body was bent diagonally because I couldn't support my body, the girl hidden behind me screamed. Then while shouting something, she run out of the room. She must have gone call for help. The man who glanced at her figure, even if his expression was hidden by the shadow, I could clearly understand he had a deep smile.

"That person was... in the morning, when she woke up, the first thing she would do was to inquire about her fiancé. When she went to sleep at night, even if her fiancé wasn't beside her she would tell him *good night*. She never said once that she was lonely. She didn't want to be a bother. Even so, her fiancé who would only come visit her on the planned day, she loved him."

From the beginning, even while she knew it was a political marriage. She believed in a love that would never be returned.

"She was supposed to become the lady of the marquis house. She was supposed to become an existence held in esteem and cherished by everyone. For this, that person had, done everything she could and yet..."

My body which was being pinned down became suddenly free, when I managed to half-rise, drops of water gently fell down as if they were dancing.

"...in *that* place, in *that* incredibly brutal way of dying, she wasn't a person who deserve to leave like that...!"

Hearing those words that he squeezed out in a hoarse voice, for some reason, a smile

floated to my face. *I see, did she die?* I'm sure I heard a voice muttered in a satisfied tone. That was a voice that came from nowhere else but my own body.

"Only you, could have saved that person and yet."

...Why, why, why? Why, was I, were *you*, laughing?

With trembling lips, the man overlooking me who was laughing said, "That it was false charges, in truth, you should have known it." I stared as countless drops of water slid down the corner of his lips. I merely stared as he raised his sword over my head.

Someone shouted "Stop it!" Appearing suddenly, I saw the shadows of several persons behind the man. "Alfred...! Do you intend to defile the pride of a knight with blood for someone like this...!"

"The pride of a knight you said, that thing, I threw it away long ago...!! When I lost that person...!!"

It sounded like a scream. Even though he spoke each word clearly, I understood he was screaming to the point of tearing his throat.

"Do you know what kind of death you gave to that person, do you know how she died...!!"

I could only watch without being able to move at all. A sensation of heat filled my shoulder. It was pierced by the blade. It didn't feel painful, but my respiration stopped. I couldn't breathe. When something was thrown toward me I reflexively stretched out my hand but it felt down. In my wavering field of vision that had turned upside down because of my slanted body, I watched it felt down without a sound on that dirty floor which hadn't been washed for who knows how long

That thing that didn't have any weight, was of a gray color that had been tainted by a dark red. It was long hairs that had been cut off.

"It looks like an old woman's hairs, right?"

That whispering voice resounded in my ears..... I couldn't say it even once. That it was beautiful, I couldn't say it not even once.

It was of a darker color than Silvia's. A color that couldn't be described as silver. But, I liked the mysterious color of her eyes that shined much more thanks to that. Those strong eyes that persisted with their will, with their conviction that was enough to overwhelm others, they have always supported me. As long as those eyes were watching me, I believed I would never lose my way.

...killed. I, killed. I killed Ilya.

Please stop it. It's enough. Please stop.

Someone.

Please tell me it's a lie.

Someone, please.



".....hnn !!!"

I swallow a breath and jumped to my feet, surprised by my own ragged breathing. My breaths were cut short, as if I had been running with all my might. I listened to them with muddled thoughts.

"...Soleil-sama?"

In the room I thought I was alone, a bewildered voice resounded. As it was at a distance close enough to feel a long breath, it made my shoulders greatly jump in

shock. When I felt nauseous as my breath refused to regulated itself as usual and covered my lips, the voice called out,

“...Soleil-sama!”

Someone presented me a wash basin which seemed to have been prepared to wash the face. Inhaling small breaths, I managed to endure the throwing feeling and forced down the burning lump back to my stomach. I felt a stinging pain at the back of my throat. When I coughed a little while listening to the pounding sound of my heart, the chamberlain peeped at me with a worried expression.

“The hell hap... , no, I mean, I, what happened to me...”

Since long ago I’ve been taught how to be careful with my phrasing. It was natural for the heir of the marquis to be polite and thoughtful, and since my entourage urged me to do so, I abided. Normally I would never be so upset, I was perplexed at my own discomposure.

“I was having an awful nightmare...”

The servant gave a curt and humble sound of acknowledgment. He gave me a wet towel and urged me to calm down my mind. Extending my hand to receive it, I noticed my fingers were trembling.

“Did you see a bad dream master?”

“...a bad dream...”

I smiled bitterly and raised a strained laugh, reproaching myself for losing my composure over a nightmare like a little child. Then, at the moment I stop smiling, my whole body lost its warmth.

“Soleil-sama?”

A nightmare? Did I see a nightmare?... What did I, see? What?

“...I don’t remember...”

Even though what I saw was bad enough to wake me up in a panicked state, I couldn’t remember a single thing. It wasn’t that I forgot, but it rather felt that I hadn’t saw a nightmare to begin with. Not even a fragment of remembrance was remaining.

“If you do not remember, then it must not have been important. It was probably a trivial thing.”

Watching the chamberlain smile again, rather than relief I felt anxiety gradually rising from my chest. It felt like I lost something, something very precious and important. And as I don’t even remember what is it that I lost, irrepressible uneasiness and irritation assailed me.

When I opened my hands, I just saw my usual palms. However, the feeling I failed to grab on something, that huge feeling of loss, blocked my breathing.

“...Ilya is...”

“Yes?”

“I wonder what Ilya is doing now?”

.....For some reason, I started to feel the irresistible urge to see her.



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